



# A matrixial gaze: portrayals of the male nude by female artists.

by

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Love to Rob and Zoë.

## ABSTRACT

### *A matrixial gaze: portrayals of the male nude by female artists.*

Traditionally although there are any number of nude men and women produced by male artists and many female nudes created by women there have been relatively few women artists working in the field of male nude. Those that have ventured into the genre face the problem of working with the male body in ways that do not perpetuate the objectification and sexualization of the body that male artists have often been accused of when they deal with the female body. This awareness of issues around subjectivity and agency in the visual arts has meant that there has been a gradual growth and readjustment of the concept of a gaze in whatever guise it comes and a need to create a means to work with the body in ways that transcend this polarizing and subjectivizing trope.

This thesis explores a relatively neglected aspect of female artistic practice, the male nude, through the lens of a matrixial gaze. This framework has previously primarily been applied to the works of its creator Bracha Ettinger and not in the context of the nude male. The concept of the matrixial gaze was used to analyse of the works of several women artists who have worked in this field. Each chapter aligns with themes gleaned from the matrixial gaze and the works of the artists have been selected insofar as they demonstrate such attributes in their work.

The research evaluated how, in the ongoing process of attempting to find means to work with the body in a way that neither denigrates it nor sets up binary and oppositional viewpoints, the matrixial gaze provides a practical methodology to work in this field. The female artists surveyed demonstrated key elements of the matrixial gaze and metamorphic borderlinking, including; fascinace, co-poiesis, wit(h)nessing and compassionate hospitality in their works. This was demonstrated in the paintings of Sylvia Sleigh who exemplifies matrixial attributes associated with fascinace and

duration through her sustained interest and involvement with the male body as well as her especially close involvement with a few particular favourite models who take on the role of muse. The co-poietic framework, where individuals work together to share partial subjectivity, is clearly in evidence through the erotic pairings depicted in Chapter 3. The images of couples sharing subjectivity and creating new beings reveal the way in which the subject/object paradigm can be subverted by exchanges- co-poïesis brings on and sets up the conditions for metramorphosis.

Wit(h)nessing occurs in Polly Borland's *Babies* series where she works to transform the trauma and pain of the marginalised subculture of men who dress as babies. This also occurs when Barbara de Genevieve works with the dispossessed, impoverished Afro-American men in the *Panhandler Project* where she crosses racial and class barriers to heal their wounds and vulnerabilities.

This shows that each artist worked to create encounters between herself, subject and viewers which set up conditions for co-operative making and sharing as well as establishing partial or shared subjectivity between all participants involved. Furthermore the matrix of encounters and interconnected networks between artist, subject and viewer provided opportunities for transformation and creation of new ideas from a trope, the male nude that has been largely associated with a particular Western Classical tradition.

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## PREFACE

The history of Western art abounds with images of the nude female. She is Venus and Aphrodite, Eve and Mary, and myriad women in between. She reclines, she bathes, she is ravaged, she sleeps. She is vixen and coquette, victim and femme fatale. She is glorious and empowered, haggard and defeated. Most of all, she is ubiquitous, and she is inevitably portrayed by the hand of a male artist. Where though, are the male nudes represented by female artists? And more importantly how can the female artist work in this genre in ways that do not perpetuate the voyeuristic gaze that male artists have been accused of using?

One of the main challenges facing women artists who have ventured into this field is how to avoid the sexual objectification of men, reproducing in reverse the voyeuristic treatment of the female nude by male artists. To complain that the female body has been objectified and then do exactly the same thing with the male body in no way progresses or improves artistic practice or theory, but merely sustains an oppositional and negative discourse. Griselda Pollock notes this potential danger when she writes:

A great deal of feminist theorization and artistic practice has identified the gaze as a key issue. In necessarily deconstructing the politics of vision by defining the gaze within a phallic regime of sexual difference, feminists have equally been trapped within a scopic regime that can only imagine the gaze in terms of mastery and sadism, or as in psychoanalytic terms, a phallic objet *a*, the lost object defined by castration, i.e separation, rejection, hate. (Pollock, 1996, p. 279).

This awareness of issues around subjectivity and agency in the visual arts has meant that there has been a gradual growth and readjustment of the concept of a gaze in whatever guise it comes. The binaries identified by theorists and the lack of subtlety working with the granularity of subjectivity, has pushed forward a need to work with difference. As Papenburg and Zarzycka have noted, there has been a more nuanced approach to the visual arts and theory through processes that are “co-emergent” and which engage phenomenological, intersubjective sensations and multiple sensory modalities (2013, location 286 kindle edition). The matrixial gaze as offered to us by Bracha Ettinger consolidates much of this thinking around the need to work outside a binary model of polarizing subject/object relations and provides us with a means to analyse art works without an oppositional viewpoint. The matrixial is associated imaginatively and symbolically with women, and as a starting point, this approach has been chosen to analyse the work of some female artists to see how their works exemplify elements of the matrixial gaze.

## INTRODUCTION

### OBJECTIVES

The aim of this thesis is to apply the concept of the matrixial gaze in the analysis of the works of several women artists who have worked in the genre of the male nude. Each chapter aligns with themes gleaned from the matrixial gaze and the works of various female artists have been selected insofar as they demonstrate such attributes in their work.

### CONTEXT

Within the context of the history of the gaze there has been, since the late 1960s, an ongoing debate about its nature and impact on visual culture. This interest and concern was observed and discussed during the 1970s by theorists such as John Berger (1972), Laura Mulvey (1975) and Margaret Walters (1978). These theorists drew attention to the ways in which the female nude has been objectified in the work of male artists, including filmmakers, through discussion and analysis of the rationale and social conditions that might have driven this particular state of affairs.

In response to this situation, a number of female artists explored new ways of portraying the female body which sought to avoid sexual objectification, and this often meant they used their own bodies as the artistic subject<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, there were relatively few attempts by female artists to portray the male nude. Philbrick comments that:

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<sup>1</sup> Such as Carolee Schneemann, *Meat Joy* (1964); *Interior scroll* (1975); Hanna Wilke, Valie Export, Lynda Benglis, Judy Chicago



The first "layer" of feminist art reclaimed female sexuality from men, but the second layer denied female sexuality, and put forward an image of women as victims. (1999, p. 22).

Likewise, artist Joan Semmel has recounted that she felt discouraged from expressing sexualized images of men, citing that a level of disapproval was evinced in some of the feminist circles she encountered. She says that "where feminism was the theory, lesbianism was the practice", resulting in a clash of ideology, for her, and her personal belief that there was a level of repression of heterosexually erotic images of men (Semmel, 2011). In a discussion with Richard Meyer, she recalls:

I was told by other women 'you shouldn't paint (painting is patriarchal), you shouldn't do the nude (it's not feminist)...but I didn't think feminism should be about proscription. In the studio, I wanted to be free (Meyer in conversation with Semmel, 2007)

In recognition of the difficulty female artists experienced when dealing with the male body, Rosemary Betterton questioned how possible it is to present the sexual body in a "way which could not be framed within a male gaze?" (1996, p. 11). She also asked:

Does a woman artist necessarily produce a different kind of imagery from her male counterparts? Can a woman who is not a feminist produce work which is feminist? If the nude is embedded in a structure of gendered looking based on male power and female passivity, is it possible for a female artist to "see" it differently? (1987, p. 218)

Since the time that Betterton first posed this question, there have been various attempts to reconceptualise the gaze in a way which transcends the oppositional nature of the subject/object dichotomy upon which the



patriarchal structure of spectatorship is predicated. Most notable amongst these have been queer theory, phenomenology and Ettinger's concept of the matrixial gaze.

Exemplifying the former, Amelia Jones (2012), asks how we can move past the binaries of subject/object spectatorship by tracing the rise and impact of identity politics and proposing that perhaps queer theory might take us some way towards abnegating this largely oppositional ideology. She calls for a means to rethink our approach to "subjectivity and viscosity" in ways that will acknowledge and incorporate culturally diverse peoples, as well as establishing some level of recognition that we need "a new model for understanding identification as a reciprocal and ongoing process that occurs among viewers, bodies images and other visual modes of the (re)presentation of subjects" (2012, location 536 kindle)

Jones' work identifies an ongoing quest for a practical means to work with, analyse and view the body within visual culture and she offers that, potentially, queer theory might be a means to provide a more encompassing, multilayered and subtle means to understand and work as artists and audience. This will be discussed further in the following chapter.

Bracha Ettinger also addresses some of these issues taking on board the criticisms offered by theorists on the lack of nuance in theories concerning the gaze. She develops a theory of the gaze where multiple layers of experience, any number of participants and partial, shared subjectivity

might occur. The theory of a matrixial gaze developed by Ettinger both provides for a symbolic space in which woman is manifested and also demonstrates an inclusive non-confrontational means of spectatorship and engagement between artist, the object of their scrutiny and the audience. Thus, the research here seeks to evaluate the possibility that in the ongoing process of attempting to find means to work with the body in a way that neither denigrates it nor sets up binary and oppositional viewpoints, the matrixial gaze provides a practical methodology to work in this field.

The value of this research is twofold: firstly, to extend the history of the gaze by expanding on the original feminist interest in identifying how women can legitimately work with the male body without falling into the same form of sexual objectification that male artists have been accused of portraying; secondly the research applies the theories of Bracha Ettinger to works of other artists where it has previously been limited almost exclusively to her own work. This tests her theories outside her particular genre and interest and demonstrates its potential for wide applicability throughout a range of visual arts.

## ARTISTS

In order to demonstrate the possibility that there are other means of depicting and interacting with an artistic subject or model the works of several women artists which align with the matrixial gaze are analysed. All of whom exemplify elements of the matrixial gaze in some way, whether that occurs through co-poietic links, creation of transformative processes between artist and model or through the ongoing development of new themes from existing tropes.

Initial research identified a few women working consistently with images of the male body since the 1970s and very few prior to that date<sup>2</sup>. The following artists from different backgrounds and eras- Sylvia Sleigh, Joan Semmel, Cecily Brown, Barbara De Genevieve, Polly Borland, Wendy Sharpe, Berlinde de Bruyckere, Dianora Niccolini, Renee Cox and Harriet Leibowitz- have been chosen for analysis as they represent evidence of the matrixial gaze in various forms within their practices, which will be discussed in detail within case studies in the following chapters. Three of these artists – Barbara De Genevieve, Dianora Niccolini and Renee Cox - are working with the black male nude as a means to question and transform prevailing cultural norms. All of the artists have worked consistently with the male body which is being used as focal point for this research.

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<sup>2</sup>Such as Angelica Kauffman, Imogen Cunningham, Olive Cotton

This is a convenient sample that is large enough to provide material for analysis and it is not designed to be representative of all female artists. There have been other artists such as Carolee Schneemann (*Fuses*, 1965) and Pipilotti Rist (*Pikelporno*, 1992) who have made significant contributions to visual culture through film, however, these artists have not been especially focused on the male nude over an extended period. In focussing exclusively on female artists there is no implication that all women exemplify the matrixial gaze, nor does it preclude the possibility that any artist regardless of their gender, identity, race, level of ability or age is not able to reveal aspects of the matrixial gaze. However, whilst it is possible that male artists could adopt this gaze, it is more likely to be found in the work of female artists because of their social conditioning. Women in our culture have been brought up to be less objectifying and voyeuristic. Their greater capacity for co-poïesis is not an essentialist attribute but the result of their cultural upbringing.

As Bordo points out, “We always “see” from points of view that are invested with our social, political and personal interests, inescapably-centric in one way or another, even in the desire to do justice to heterogeneity”(1993, p. 223). My particular interests in this thesis are focused on the interaction between the female artist and the male body and the desire to find a means of moving away from the usual, stereotypical, paradigm of spectatorship and making that involves polarizing subject/object interactions.

The goal is to reveal a gaze that moves away from the usual binary of viewed and viewer to exemplify the matrixial gaze or use of the metramorphic borderspace identified by Ettinger, discussed in detail in Chapter 1. This form of gaze is described as one which seeks to allow a flowing reciprocal interaction between all participants and exchanges of energy whilst building networks of connections, rather than employing static oppositional subject/object relationships in which the viewer occupies the dominant position (Betterton, 1987, pp.217-218). Ettinger's work provides a nuanced and considered response to feminist concerns about the homogeneity of early feminist discourse and provides a sophisticated articulation of the process of working within the subject/object interaction, through partial and shared subjectivity.

## STRUCTURE

*Chapter 1* provides context about the nude in Western culture and introduces and explains the idea of the matrixial gaze as theorized by Ettinger, establishing background for identifying how this set of artists produce images of the male nude in non-oppositional terms. It will identify key aspects of this concept: fascinace; co-poïesis; wit(h)nessing and metramorphosis which provide the framing for the analysis of the works discussed in the subsequent chapters.

*Chapter 2 Fascinace, Duration and History in the Paintings of Sylvia Sleigh* examines the way in which Sylvia Sleigh's protracted evaluation and involvement with the male nude evidences the concept of fascinace both in terms of the duration of her practice and the inclusion of time/duration through historical and mythological references within her works.

*Chapter 3 Co-poïesis and Coupling* analyses how the erotic couple in selected works of Joan Semmel, Wendy Sharpe and Cecily Brown exemplify the concept of co-poësis, or co-making, as described by Bracha Ettinger. It discusses how partial subjectivity and co-emergence sets up conditions for a non-objectifying gaze where all of the participants in the making, creation and viewing of the work share the gaze.

*Chapter 4 Co-poïesis and play*, works alongside Chapter 3 to identify how play and humour might be seen as a means of creating co-poietic bonds and obviate the potential to objectify the body. In this chapter works by Barbara De Genevieve and Polly Borland are examined and analysed in order to see how they evidence co-poïesis through playful imagery and concepts.

*Chapter 5 Wit(h)nessing The Vulnerable Body: Healing Male Wounds* analyses the vulnerable male body and how the female artist witnesses and shares wounds and trauma with her subject in order to heal them. This occurs through transgressive border-linking between the artist and her subject where trauma is shared and transmuted into something manageable. Polly Borland's series *The Babies*, Barbara de Genevieve's *Panhandler Series* and several works by Berlinde de Bruyckere are encountered and discussed. All of these works demonstrate how the artist can help to carry and share trauma and in doing so dissipate the pain and suffering that some of the subjects may experience.

*Chapter 6 Transforming the classical body through metramorphosis:* examines how the closed borders of the classical form, which has traditionally been a genre associated with an idealized and sometimes sterile refinement, can be opened up both physically and culturally to be transformed into a new and revived format through metramorphosis. Works by Dianora Niccolini, Renee Cox and Harriet Leibowitz are examined to see how they have been able to recreate the stereotypical refined classical idealized male figure into a more accessible trope in their practices.

## CHAPTER 1: IN THEORY

There are several broad conceptual themes which inform this research namely: the nude, the impact of the male gaze in visual culture, and the way in which the matrixial gaze might be applied to provide a viable approach to analysing images of the male body by female artists.

### A STATE OF UNDRRESS; THE MALE NUDE

In this section the focus is on how the patriarchal nature and tradition of the male nude has shaped its portrayal in Western culture. This will provide the necessary background to later chapters where women artists in this field have changed the tradition and meaning of the male nude through the use of matrixial encounters.

Kenneth Clark (1956), Margaret Walters (1978), Richard Leppert (1996), Abigail Solomon-Godeau (1997), Susan Bordo (1999), and Ruth Barcan (2004) provide essential context about the nature and rationale of the male nude as an important construction in the Western cultural artistic canon. Each of these authors reveals an ongoing interest in the subject and our attempts to understand it. For Clark, ‘the naked’ denotes a state of undress, a natural human embodied form, while ‘the nude’ suggests a veneer or layer of idealization. Clark emphasises that the nude is the only great subject when he says:

No nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling, even though it be only the faintest shadow – and if it does not do so, it is bad art and false morals. The desire to grasp and be united with another human body is so fundamental a part of our nature that our judgement of what is known as “pure form” is inevitably influenced by it (1956, p.8).

The nude, as opposed to naked and “deprived of our clothes” (Clark, 1956, p.3) is an artefact; a construction used to wrap the body in a decorous skin. Clark uses the words “balanced, prosperous and confident” (1956, p.3) to describe the nude, especially the male nude, and in doing so elevates it to the highest aesthetic canon. Conversely nakedness can suggest vulnerability and the fear of being scrutinized.

However, as Ruth Barcan identifies, there are several elements of Clark’s work which highlight his bias and cultural background. This includes seeing the nude through a particular lens which is “based on an unequivocal hierarchy of mind over body, an idealist universalism, and the structural conflation of heterosexual desire-in-general” (2004, p.34). Clark’s theorization, according to Barcan, does not account for the lived experience of the body and lauds the sealed off nude ahead of the “vulnerable and flawed nakedness of actual bodies” (2004, p.45). He barely mentions the priapic and agricultural form of the nude that in itself subverts the ideal Classical body. Clark represents a class and culture which automatically associates the nude primarily with woman and assumes that the artist is a male.



Berger, in contrast to Clark, extols the virtues of the naked body over the socially loaded nude (1972, p.48) by suggesting that nakedness is a natural undisguised state whereas the nude is a form of dress and allows the body to be on display where it is simultaneously sanitized and aestheticized (1972, p.48). They both agree that the nude is a refined and perhaps purified version of the body whereas the naked figure is without such artifice. However, they have different appreciations of these bodies, Berger preferring the naked figure over the seemingly dressed and on display, nude.

Where Clark (1957) emerges from a masculine, classicist background and concentrates on works created from antiquity and the Renaissance, Margaret Walters (1978) incorporates observations about the lack of a female artistic perspective within that canon and the seeming absence or loss of the male nude in a contemporary context. She builds on our overall understanding of this subject from a feminist viewpoint and fleshes out themes associated with the paucity of female presence working with the male nude and how women might read and respond to it in their work. In the process she seeks to understand why women artists have been under-represented or essentially absent in this field. As she writes: "...although we know a great deal about how men see both male and female bodies, we know far less about how women see men" (1978, p. 15). Walters highlights the historical longevity and significance of the male nude within the context of Western civilization. In this framework, depictions of the male body have often been used to symbolize a range of roles which denote various facets of

masculinity—the “manly virtues” (Walters, 1978, pp. 9-10) such as, intellectual prowess, majesty, courage, heroism and wisdom, whereas the female nude has usually been associated only with one facet: sexuality. This has provided the male artist with the capacity to explore aspects of maleness through accepted forms and tropes: the warrior, the lover, the statesman, the boy. Similarly Iris Marion Young supports this and says “masculinity entails individual existence, where the person defines his own individual projects and creates his own nature” (1990, p. 74), yet this field has largely been denied the female artist and it has been difficult for them to work within this genre.

Until recent times, as noted by Walters, “The ban on women studying the live model – historically an insurmountable barrier to anyone with serious professional ambitions – survived almost until the end of the last century<sup>3</sup>” (1978, p. 314). Thus, women were not able to study the male nude in life drawing classes, <sup>4</sup>and indeed, this was one of the main reasons for their exclusion from art academies until the nineteenth century (Walters, 1978, pp. 314-5). Further to this, as consumers of art, male patrons directed the production of particular imagery, usually the female body. Even when male nudes were featured in an art context, they were often represented through admirable masculine characteristics or alternatively the ephebic,

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<sup>3</sup> Walters means the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but according to Elizabeth Lee (1997 on her web page) during 1862 in the Royal Academy Antique School London, and 1868 in the Pennsylvania Academy, the loin-draped semi-nude male was used as a model

<sup>4</sup> Even though there were women working earlier than this time as professional artists, such as Artemesia Gentileschi, Sofia Anguissola, Angelica Kauffman (Heller, 1978, p. 15 p29-32; p. 53-54; Greer, 1979, p. 3) they were not necessarily working with the nude male to an appreciable extent

in the sense of being an adolescent feminized, <sup>5</sup> male figure, (Dunstan, 2000, pp. 149-152; Solomon-Godeau, 1997, p. 55) both serving to sustain the status quo of a powerful viewer either by association and identification with the pictured body or by sustaining power over a passive figure.

Although for millennia the male body has represented potent social and cultural symbols associated with power, political and religious strength, sexual prowess and authority (Bordo, 1993, p. 216, 1999, pp. 84-97), in more recent times, as Walters argues, we have removed the male figure from such a context (1978, p. 7). She suggests that as nudity has increasingly come to be associated with erotic connotations rather than being symbolic of power and authority, so the male nude has become less prevalent. However, even though since the time that Walters wrote her book, there has been some resurgence of images of the male nude, this has occurred primarily amongst male artists, often in a homoerotic context, as exemplified, for instance, by photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, while there are still relatively few women artists who have tackled this subject.

The distinction between naked and nude is also discussed by Ruth Barcan who provides that the terms have been persistently contradictory and depend on social environmental conditions and the situation in which they are presented (2004, p.82). She suggests that the naked body is a “site for ambivalence” (2004, p.3) through its different readings and associations. This is exemplified through the relative meanings of nakedness, for

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<sup>5</sup> The Ephebe is an adolescent youth who has attained the age of puberty, often depicted as wearing enticing and revealing robes (Dunstan, 2000, pp. 249-251)

example, where naked can be simultaneously read as without artifice and an innocent state and debased through deprivation and lack of covering (Barcan, 2004. p.7). Essentially then the nude or naked body must be read in the realm in which it is presented and through the role it might be playing and both terms are culturally mediated and driven. She says that “states of dress or undress do not occur in a vacuum but take place in particular situations involving a whole complex of roles and actants” (2004, p.22).

In response to Clark, Barcan identifies his stance as one that identifies “Nakedness is the “raw” human body without clothes. Nudity results when the artist works on the raw material.” (2004, p.33) In this context she says that “Nakedness is imperfect and individual; nudity is culture. The artist’s work departicularizes the model’s nakedness, lifting it into ideality” (2004, p.33).

Whilst the nude generally has many cultural meanings and values the male nude in particular has been something of a conundrum. Richard Leppert believes that “the nude male body has presented a host of problems that intersect with but are distinct from those attached to the nude female body” (1996, p.247). This is largely due to the fact that nudity involves revealing the genitals to others and potentially being open to the voyeuristic and sexualized gaze. Leppert notes:

For the male viewer, access to the sight of the nude female ordinarily serves as confirmation of male power, if only imagined. Access to the sight of the male nude is more complicated. If nudity is associated with shame, it is

likewise associated with sexuality. Yet to be looked at sexually is to be consumed or taken by sight. Not for nothing is the gaze - the stare- said to be penetrating (1996, p. 248).

The male nude has also traditionally been generated by male artists for male clients and is a strongly masculine formal construction - in essence the male nude is not for women (Leppert, 1996, p. 251).

Leppert says that the nude male has been used to represent admirable and noble civic qualities but has also been depicted homoerotically, as Solomon-Godeau has also pointed out in her analysis of the male nude in late eighteenth/early nineteenth century French culture. This body is situated within a masculine culture and as such is quite frequently feminized. The effect of this form of the male figure is to establish a subject/object relationship between artist and model with is basically the same as the relationship between male artist and female model. There is no room here for the female artist or a female viewer.

As Leppert points out, the cultural taboos associated with looking at the male body requires careful negotiation (1996, p. 250), for both sexes, and this focuses on the genitals. Leppert says that “male identity hinges, culturally speaking on genital accounts of masculinity” (1996, p. 257) and this is where there tends to be a major issue in the representation of the naked men. One of the pervasive and controversial issues society has with public male nudity is associated with the role of the penis, which also has a bearing on how we are allowed to depict and view the nude body. Barcan notes that: “In almost every public context except medical and occasionally

theatrical circumstances, the penis is by definition indecent” (2004, p. 17). This means that it can be quite difficult to work with the male figure as we can be verging on a socially proscribed field as it is both legally and socially forbidden. This is recognized by Bordo who identifies that there is a metaphorical aspect of the penis. She says that “the penis has a symbolic "double" that is entirely the creation of the cultural imagination: the phallus” (1999, p. 74). This too has an impact on how we are able to both view and create images of the naked male figure, as many men are likely to feel uncomfortable about anyone seeing them fully revealed.

Consequently, the nude has symbolic significance in the sense that not only does it usually represent an idealized vision of the human form but also has a strong relationship to the sensual or sexual body. By associating nudity with sexual intimacy there are always dual reference points – on one hand formal idealization and association with particular symbolic and aesthetic values and on the other, the more personal world of sexual desire. As Barcan notes “nudity and sex are linked together, but sexuality is itself embedded in larger questions about subjectivity, power and human identity” (2004, p. 4).]

How female artists have engaged with the male nude underpins this project, as well as the theme of evaluating how women who do work in the field are resolving the persistent issue of how to represent the male nude from a non-patriarchal perspective. In order to follow this theme further it is necessary to examine the nature of the gaze as it has operated in representations of the nude.

## THE GAZE

In the 1970s, feminist visual theory developed and advanced the argument that there is a power imbalance in the gaze which invests men with capacity to look whilst simultaneously relegating women to the position of object of the gaze. John Berger (1972) argued that there is a power differential involved between the person who looks and the object of their scrutiny, and his work reinforced the fact that in general men look and women are looked at. Men have the power of the gaze but no inclination to be looked at in the same way. He refers to the male gaze as being the central rationale behind most media and cinematic forms, and as a result there is a lack of capacity to formulate and articulate specific female language and response to those constructions.

The masculine viewer, according to Berger, owns the look. This reinforces his sense of powerful mastery over the object: the woman as spectacle.

In the art-form of the European nude the painters and spectator owners were usually men and the persons treated as objects, usually women. This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our culture that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity. (Berger, 1972, p. 63).

Berger's active versus passive paradigm of the gazer and gazed-at has coloured, moderated and driven our concept of this phenomenon in Western visual culture. Unpicking Berger, even slightly, shows that he has quite clearly indicated that as producers and consumers of art, men are able to direct content of such imagery. By extension this adds another

layer to explanation as to why women do not, generally, produce images of the naked male figure.

In a similar vein to Berger, Laura Mulvey argued that women are presented for the delectation of the male spectator as a pleasurable and voyeuristic experience, focusing in particular on cinema from the 1950s. Her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”(1975) observes that men are usually shown in strong, active roles directing the filmic action whereas women often play a passive foil to a masculine protagonist, reflecting the fact that most film producers have been men working within a patriarchal culture. Mulvey claims:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly (1989, p. 19)

Mulvey, using Freudian psychoanalytic theory, analyses the nature, role and position of the spectator when experiencing the narrative action of a film, referring to Freud’s ideas on scopophilia where the viewer obtains erotic pleasure from looking at the body of another who is unaware of being observed. Essentially, she is proposing that the whole experience of the cinema allows for this voyeuristic, onanistic, masculine experience, one which ‘reflects the psychical obsessions of the society which produced it’ and is couched in the erotic “language of the dominant patriarchal order” (1975, p. 59).



This element of her work reinforces a male visual perspective, and substantially reaffirms the male gaze without really dealing with or identifying a female look, other than one that is associated with a male viewpoint. By using Freudian terms of reference, she is also commenting on the way in which psychoanalytic theory is essentially another male domain, working to describe masculine values and themes. Using a masculine methodology to describe a male industry and the male spectator, she says “The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action” (1975, p. 63).

Revisiting this theme, in 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" inspired by *Duel in the Sun*' (1993), she revises her stance and proposes the hypothesis that some women are active participants and viewers in a similar way to men. However, the way she theorises this is problematic since it does not allow for the possibility of a form of looking which does not reproduce the unequal spectatorial positions implicit in the male gaze. Whilst Mulvey's writing touches on the possibility that the female viewer may in fact align with the active male protagonist, there is still effectively a reinforcement of the male gaze by replacing the active male spectator or actor with a female who demonstrates a similar set of male behaviours. In Mulvey's theory there is no possibility of a female gaze which does not reproduce the unequal power relations inherent in the position of the male viewer.

There is, then, a fairly consistent pattern of written discourse which identifies the concept of a gaze as essentially a masculine position. This gaze is identified as being about the power relationships and transactions experienced between a more powerful male viewer and a less powerful, objectified female figure. It is conceived in oppositional terms where the dominant role is usually associated with the gazer, and the passive position is that of the gazed-at. Neither Berger nor Mulvey offer an “explanation of how women look at images of women” (Betterton, 1987, p. 217) and, more importantly for this research; how they might look at men. This is questioned by other writers as well. As Marcia Gamman writes:

While many writers have considered how men look at women, few seemed to have asked how women in the eighties create and view images of each other and men. The female gaze remains an enigma because, as I shall argue, the very framework of debate reinforces assumptions which blinker the vision of change for women (Gamman & Marshment, 1989, p. 12).

Thus there has been a call to question both the reality of a female gaze and attempts to identify the feminine perspective as underlined by Gamman and Marshment when they ask:

How useful is the theory for studying female spectatorship if it cannot adequately formulate the significance of the active female experience except in terms that assume a masculine position? (Gamman & Marshment, 1989. p. 24).

## A FEMALE GAZE?

Several writers, (Betterton, 1986; 1987; 1996, Young, 1990, Cranny-Francis, 1995, Irigaray, 1993; 2011, Pollock 1996; 1999) have exhorted artists and theorists to clarify and define what a female visual experience might be. Betterton says:

If 'pleasure in looking is split between 'active/male' and 'passive/female', then how do I as a woman explain my enjoyment of certain images, especially within a category such as the nude? (1987, p. 217)

Anaïs Nin, when discussing the problems of writing about sexuality from a woman's perspective, could as easily be speaking for a female artist or author when she suggests:

Women, I thought, were more apt to fuse sex with emotion, with love, and to single out one man rather than be promiscuous. This became apparent to me as I wrote the novels and the Diary, and I saw it even more clearly when I began to teach. But although women's attitude towards sex was quite distinct from that of men, we had not yet learned how to write about it. (1976, p. 14)

She highlights the problem of not having a language, or set of symbols and structures which could be used by women to describe their life-love experiences. If this concept is applied to the woman artist depicting the male nude there are similarities; the lack of language, perhaps lack of permission and a need to be involved emotionally in some way with the subject of her work. A woman might also feel that she needs permission to look at the man she is depicting, and this might also suggest that she needs

an emotional connection to that body; that person, in order to venture into such territory.

Susan Bordo recognizes and comments on the novelty of the positioning of the female as viewer rather than viewed through her account of her encounter with images of the male body in Calvin Klein advertisements.

She describes her surprise at seeing an underpants-clad young male model in a popular magazine, writing:

It was the spring of 1995 and I was sipping my first cup of morning coffee, not yet fully awake, flipping through the New York Times Magazine, when I had my first real taste of what it's like to inhabit this visual culture as a man. It was both thrilling and disconcerting. ...[and] provoke[d] me into erotic consciousness (1999, p. 168).

She adds that she felt for the first time that she had been given “cultural permission to be a voyeur” (1999, p. 170). Although there is, in her response, a sense that she understands how it might feel to “inhabit this visual culture as a man”, the words “permission to be a voyeur” are also interesting because they suggest a mendicant position where the male figure is still in control of who looks or the conditions surrounding himself as viewed object.

Beth Eck has, similarly, identified that women are uncomfortable about viewing the male body and suggests that women are particularly “uncomfortable with exposed male genitalia” (2003, p. 700). Her journal article analyses how a sample of people react to images of both male and female nude figures, with the aim of investigating if men and women look at

such images differently. Although this study is small and culturally homogenous it has value for this research. Eck asked her participants to talk about and describe their response to images of naked male and female figures. She found that both men and women were able to talk freely and descriptively about the female nudes she gave them to look at but were uncomfortable about the male figures she showed them. Respondents discussed the female nude with confidence but, particularly in the case of the male participants, were not able to talk as freely or with clear articulation about the male nude. The men indicated that they were very uncomfortable about looking at the male nude because it might imply that they had homosexual tendencies while the women reported that they did not “like” looking at male genitals.

The women, Eck believes, are effectively socially barred from looking at the male nude, perhaps because they are unaccustomed to doing so, or believe that men might disapprove of them looking at the male body in a sexualized way.

As Eck’s study reveals, women, through a range of social proscriptions have been traditionally reluctant to admit their response to sexually explicit images generated through looking, even though clearly they are and do experience an erotic response. There is definitely some form of a gaze or interaction happening and it may be that the idea of a nebulous and hard to pin down matrix of relationships and interactions occur without being obvious.

One of the critical sticking points associated with the male gaze is that its genesis is within a particular frame of reference that deals with subject/object relations and unequal male/female interactions. The core of the argument has been focused on the privileged position and impact that white, male, Western culture has had on society for “thousands of years” (Bordo, 1993, p. 224). Although feminism has highlighted this monoculture and its pervasive dominance, there has been some level of dissonance where women of colour, different races, ages and sexual identification have not been fully accommodated or included as having a voice whose “material history, values and perspectives had yet to be written” (Bordo, 1993, p. 216). This omission became an important requirement in the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the other seven billion gazes in the world.<sup>6</sup>

Bordo notes:

Where once the prime objects of academic feminist critique were phallocentric narratives of our male dominated disciplines, now feminist criticism has turned to its own narratives finding them reductionist, totalizing, inadequately nuanced, valorizing of gender difference, unconsciously racist and elitist (1993, p. 216)

As discussed earlier in this chapter the gaze and the binary nature of the subject/object interaction between the viewer and viewed informs much of our relationship to visual culture and to art. In terms of art history, there

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<sup>6</sup> The television broadcaster SBS in Australia has a regular promotional video clip that suggests there are 7 billion stories- and gazes- one generated from each person in the world.

has often been a level of homogenization in our approach to such culture with an inbuilt unconscious bias towards Western ideas which focus on a particular world view, one without reference to the specificity of racial, social and economic conditions. Bordo points out that this has led to an oversimplification and lack of understanding of a full range of factors and human distinctions in this context which has valued Western ideals over non-Western cultures. This emerges from a particular standpoint at a particular time and exposes the “gendered nature of history, culture and society” (Bordo, 2012, p. 219) where there were “women of color, lesbians and others who found their history and culture ignored” (1993, p. 220).

This identifies, and problematizes, a tendency towards conflation of a range of concerns about race, colour, ethnicity and gender which does not drill down into the details of individual cultural specificity and background. Although drawing on a similar impetus as feminism, which observed the need to reveal inequities and biases against women generally, Bordo pushes the conceptual framework further by highlighting the need for a broader and more socially inclusive approach to recognizing and working with people of many backgrounds, identifications and persuasions.

Amelia Jones discusses identity comprehensively in her book *Seeing Differently: A history of Theory and Identification* (2012), where she both reviews the history of identification and gender in visual art culture and suggests a means to go forward by incorporating and recognizing difference.

She highlights the negative binaries sustained throughout the history of the gaze and visual culture suggesting that:

feminist visual theory, and to some degree anti-racist theory, of the 1970s and 1980s focused on defining and exposing the oppositional structures of the belief through which this [male, white] subject produced himself as master of the visual field (by projecting women, blacks, queers and others as “other”) (2012, p. 79).

She notes:

Identity is still the key pressure in determining how we navigate the world of visual culture, with often invisible but seemingly inexorable beliefs about self as reflected in the visual image, and the self as defined in opposition to an “other” (2012, p. 14)

Where the specific focus of issues associated with the gaze was aimed at men and women in a Western context, Jones calls for a reassessment of this view and the need to become more multilayered and diverse. Thus, throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s the concerns around both identity and gender have been of great interest and analysis in both an artistic and social context, where marginalized and excluded groups and individuals have sought to be included in art historical terms.

Jones suggests that queer theory, and queer art practice, provides a way in which to develop a multilayered interactive relationship between participants working with, making and viewing artworks. In these terms, queerness is described as something that allows for the fluid nature of gendered and sexed human interactions outside of heteronormative relations. Jones proposes that queerness disorients the subject in space



and time and opens up potentially different viewings and practices (2012, p. 170). She suggests that in practical terms we are always working within a multilayered, intersectional world and that identity and gender are constant, yet changing, attendants to our daily viewing, discussion and lived experience. We carry out the performance and operation of identity with us wherever we are in the world. This provides a useful way to begin to re-theorize the gaze outside the usual paradigm of subject/object relations. In turn Ettinger's matrixial theory of the gaze takes this a step further through her elaboration of a non-oppositional conception of the gaze where identities are never fixed but are constantly mutating as a result of their interactions with each other.

## THE MATRIXIAL GAZE

In contrast to the paradigm of an oppositional gaze that places the subject in a superior role to the object of such a gaze, Ettinger provides an alternative approach which allows for partial subjectivity and a concomitant partial objectivity for participants within an encounter. Termed a “matrixial gaze” or the “matrixial borderspace” this perspective suggests that there are ways of looking and relating to the other that do not necessarily create opposition and polarity, but support exchanges and encounters that work together or alongside one another. She says that the “Matrix is not the opposite of the Phallus, it is rather a supplementary perspective” (1994, p. 13) and provides a means to initiate language and a symbolic register for woman through the medium of the womb. In similar fashion to the phallus, the womb is not the actual bodily organ but provides capacity to represent its metaphorical attributes.

As Pollock writes of Ettinger’s theory:

The binaries which still haunt and imprison phallic as much as most feminist thinking are utterly overcome by her [Bracha Ettinger’s] proposal of a concept of matrixial subjectivity where the I and the non-I encounter each other and exist without attempting to destroy or master, to assimilate or incorporate (Pollock, 1994, p. 12)

This suggests that, not only do the people involved have access to an equal position within the meeting, but there are also opportunities to work alongside the other without subsuming or negating one another. Ettinger

says that this form of trans-subjectivity works to build an encounter which “transgresses individual psychic boundaries” (2005, p. 703) and is often subliminal. Her concepts of a matrixial gaze and matrixial border-linking or border-spaces provides entrée to a form of looking and experiencing which accommodates the haptic, the psychic and a full range of encounters between people without placing one before the other. She writes that the:

Matrix is a symbolic unconscious space of co-emergence and co-fading of the I and the unknown - neither rejected nor assimilated (or fused) - non-I, modelled upon the feminine/prenatal intersubjective relations and reflecting a shared borderspace in which what I call differentiation-in-co-emergence and distance-in-proximity are continuously re-tuned and re-organized by processes of metramorphosis, creating relations-without-relating, (1994, p. 13)

Thus, her idea of a metramorphic matrixial borderspace provides an alternative means to work, within a symbolic medium, with the concept of a gaze from a feminine perspective. Her dual role as both psychoanalyst and artist provides her with deep understanding of her field which she has combined with an aesthetic practice that underpins and emerges alongside it.

Broadly there are several elements to the matrixial borderspace: the matrix itself; co-poïesis; fascinane; wit(h)nessing and metramorphosis.

Essentially the matrix provides the conceptual framework and medium for the process of co-poïesis and fascinane which in turn generates a metramorphic exchange or exchanges. This metramorphosis takes the form of the creation of transgressive interpersonal linkages between participants

in the encounter. Fascinance, she suggests, occurs as part of the transformational exchange, where there is a “prolongation of and delaying of the time of the encounter event” (2005, p. 707). This can only take place in an environment of “com-passionate hospitality” (2005, p. 707), where each of the participants witness and share in the encounter- are wit(h)nesses (2005, p. 705). These terms will be explained more fully below and within the chapters that follow.

She uses the model of the prenatal relationship between mother and child as a means of formulating a symbolic, matrixial, partner to the Phallus or phallic domain, one which builds on partial subjectivity rather than domination and avoids a Lacanian phallic regime that is based on “lack, loss and foreclosure” (Ettinger. 1997, p. 629). Pollock notes:

Metamorphosis gives us access to a route for the feminine to filter into the Symbolic, into meaning. This feminine is not specular and can only be murdered by being trapped in a phallic gaze (1996, p. 279).

Using the ‘womb’ as a metaphor Ettinger conceptualises the matrix as analogous to the idea of the intra-uterine relationship the mother and child experience, where this is seen as a shared co-habitation in which both are simultaneously deeply aware of one another, or part of each other, yet still essentially strangers. She says:

I took the intra-uterine meeting as a model for human relationships, links and processes of transformation and exchange in which the non-I is unknown, but not an intruder. Rather the non-I is a partner in difference (1994, p. 14) (Matrix before the phallus)

The use of the idea of a pre-natal relationship taps into the universality of the mother and child paradigm as all people experience being carried in the womb of the mother. The matrixial encourages metaphorical ideas of nurturance, carriage and generation of networks and webs and recognizes even though the mother carries a child and the child is part of her, it is also separate.

She develops this theme into a paradigm which proposes that rather than see relationships between people as a binary that sets up oppositional forces, the matrix allows for a formulation of intersubjective relations, an amorphous site of near misses and encounters. By using the intra-uterine as a beginning, we are provided with options to perceive numerous simultaneous perspectives, which provide passageways, thresholds and interactions. The matrix allows “for a shared multiple subjectivity in which elements discern one another without knowing the other, co-emerge and co-habit a space with neither fusion nor rejection” (Ettinger, 1994, p. 14). Essentially, each participant, regardless of how many there are, is a partial subject and partial object in any encounter. In addition, this partial subjectivity brings with it traces of other meetings and encounters, which in turn build links and networks –the border links Ettinger speaks of as part of the act of generating border spaces and transformative experiences and networks.

Ettinger argues that this form of exchange “transgresses (and precedes) the Phallic-Oedipal notion of subjectivity and femininity, and of gender identification (1994, p. 14)” and shifts the boundaries of the “body-in-

identity” (1997, p .641) as the matrix comes before such things. Gender identification is in this sphere, a later life phase, acquired through personal experience and growth. Both Ettinger and Pollock, separately, suggest that as every person regardless of their sexuality or gender identification emerges from this maternal space and carries it with them in some way through life (Ettinger in conversation with Evans, 2016, no page; Pollock, 2004, p. 8), this provides for the capacity to avoid the specificities of identity without dismissing them - they are accommodated and included within the matrix.

In order to experience metramorphosis, within the matrixial borderspace, participants are involved in a process of creating links with other/s and the world at large; this is identified as co-poïesis. Ettinger is using this term to describe a form of making; one where creators/participants interact in a compassionate, co-operative fashion. This is a shared space where there is an establishment of a continuously “mutating co-poïetic net where creativity might occur” (2005, p. 705) and is a form of “aesthetical and ethical creative potentiality of borderlinking and metramorphic weaving” (2005, p. 705).

The theme here is concerned with interconnected meetings and encounters where there is a psychic resonance with the other or others. Often these threads are unconscious and work below the threshold of cognition. Co-poïesis involves reciprocal trans-subjective encounters between partial subjects in the matrixial borderspace.

Through co-poïesis, metramorphosis can occur, generating threads and links, passages and interconnected borders, thresholds- out of focus, slippery and transformative encounters. Metramorphosis speaks of continuous fluid movement, where relations between people are constantly evolving and changing, fading, re-emerging and developing rapport.

“Metramorphosis is a process of inter psychic trans-individual communication and transformation between/with-in several entities in a matrixial borderspace” (Ettinger, 1997, p. 634). This is a:

Shared psychic borderspace in which differentiation-in-co-emergence and distance-in-proximity are continuously re-attuned by metramorphosis created by and further creating (accompanied by matrixial affects) relations- without relating on the borders of presence and absence, subject and object, me and the stranger (Ettinger, 1997. pp. 633-634)

The focus is on communication and creation of new links between individuals whilst dissolving boundaries. This process, if it can really be called a process, more an event perhaps, is characterized by creating interwoven passageways and openings, much like the way in which the womb, the matrix, creates threads and supporting networks in the body to nurture and host the growing offspring.

Within the continuum of the metramorphic exchange there are also aspects of the experience which accommodate duration, transformation and the moment or moments of meeting with the other: this is termed “fascinace”. Ettinger says fascinace works as a foil to Lacan’s concept of fascinum (2005, p. 706) “in which fascinum – “evil eye” or “spell” is set as a freezing visual element of the gaze” (Teronauha, 2008, unpaginated), whereas

fascinace promotes interaction and compassionate hospitality to support transformation, co-emergence and ripening. It creates and builds within an encounter, a form of timeless prolongation of the meeting. “Fascinace might turn into what Lacan describes as fascinum – where castration, separation, wearing, split or rejection abruptly intervene[s]” (Ettinger, 2005, p. 706). This suggests that there is always potential for the moment to change from one of creative interweaving and acceptance to closure and endings if the opening is shut off. This hinges on participation, trans-subjectivity and exchanges - creation of borderlinks.

It is becoming clear that this conceptual framework depends on the open, willing or accepting interaction of all participants in order for it to work effectively. Ettinger describes this as “wit[h]nessing” combining the idea of witnessing a thing and “with” so that there is a sense of witnessing and sharing with one another. Ettinger defines “withness-in-differentiation as jointness that puts the I and non-I in a witnessing and sharing (with) relations” (1997, p. 634, footnote 7). It is here that the gaze, in the form of the matrixial, begins to take shape and produce links to art-making.

If we view the matrix as an amorphous and peripheral space, the gaze too takes on similar attributes. Rather than transfix the other in a mastering gaze, the matrixial gaze is one that wanders and diffracts. Ettinger says:

The matrixial gaze thrills us while fragmenting, multiplying, scattering and joining grains together. It turns us into what we may call participatory witnesses to traumatic events, at the price of diffracting us into grains. It



threatens us with disintegration while allowing transgression towards a drama wider than our individual-selves (1997, 642).

She is proposing a gaze that does not trap us but is a form of witnessing in an encounter, hence the wit(h)nessing trope, which aligns this gaze to continual positional changes and movement between the other and non-other. We are with one another, and the matrixial gaze involves sharing of the gaze and, through that, sharing borderlinks are created between partial subjects. This diffraction and dispersal between those part subjects allows for “grains” of subjectivity, (Ettinger, 1997, p. 635) which in turn become links and traces in other encounters; essentially, this gaze is one that works to build interaction and connection rather than freezing, splitting and lack. As Pollock suggests, this form of looking, has no fixed centre and it:

Cannot hold a fixed gaze - or if it has a center, constantly slides to the borderline, to the margins. Its gaze escapes the margins and returns to the margins. Through this process the limits, borderlines and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones (1996, p. 278)

Given that there has been a persistent interest in the objectifying gaze in an art historical context and in feminist research, this form of gaze that works alongside the male gaze - which has usually been conceived as a mastering gaze- is one that provides a means to work with the gaze as an empowering process rather than something that diminishes the other.

Extending the matrixial gaze into artmaking recognizes and allows for collaboration and interaction between artist and subject followed by a

different set of witnessing, and wit(h)nessing, by the viewer. Throughout this process there are new things, thoughts and ideas germinated by the involvement of multiple personae, all of whom leave traces in the creation of the work. In addition, we, as viewers, do not have to read an artwork as one that promotes the usual dichotomy of a subject/object relationship. This means that the viewer needs to actively allow for a new reading of an art work so that rather than continue to sustain the ongoing paradigm of binary viewing, we are offered something else which sets up a collaborative encounter with the art object.

Usually analytical focus is on Ettinger's own painting, writing and practices and this warrants some explanation before attempting to extend the application of the matrixial gaze to other artists. She says that:

I begin with art. We are connected through art even if we are, as individuals, retreating from one another and from the world. Each of my paintings starts from the traces of images of human figures — mothers, women and children — abandoned, naked and facing their death. The figure's wound is her own, but as we witness it, we realize traces of her wound are in me and in you. (Ettinger, quoted by Evans, 2016, no page number)

Such works often use images of the Holocaust as a starting point; building on them, obscuring, repeating the image, blurring the lines and boundaries. She is working with memories, amorphous, half-realized and faded, implied and vaguely familiar: the erased female godhead, the lines of naked women waiting before their deaths in Treblinka or Auschwitz, Eurydice palely following Orpheus while gibbering ghosts clutch at her skirts. The Eurydice series (1999-2001) often depicts ghostly, barely

discernible figures, grainy, soft (almost like an ultrasound of a foetus) and veiled. We are shown figments of recognizable forms and almost as soon as we begin to know what is emerging, it fades. The viewer can only peer and try to follow the trace, rebuild the figure in the mind's eye.



Figure 1 Bracha Ettinger, *Eurydice No. 23*, 1994-1998, reworked photograph with oil on paper, mounted on canvas, 29 x 51 cm.

The matrixial is exemplified through formal painterly techniques of erasure, obscuration, fading figuration, softness at the edge, whilst referring to abstractions such as emotional trauma and absence in the form of partly obscured female figures derived from photographs of Holocaust victims.

Time and memory are evoked, bringing the idea of fascinancy into play, as well as co-emergence and fading at the borders of realization. To achieve this effect, Ettinger uses a photocopy machine to develop pockmarked residual, half resolved images which leave traces and grains on the surface

of the page – traces and grains of past encounters, memory and trauma transformed into some new thing that can be carried forward by the viewer.

She discusses this approach in terms of us as witnessing trauma, suggesting that through that witnessing we are made proximate to the people who were involved in the events of the past. Ettinger says that painting in this manner is a passageway that provides us with both a link to the past, and notionally, the future as we are made aware of the violence behind us and attempt to avoid it (Evans, 2016, unpaginated). Ettinger says in an interview with Evans:

Painting for me is an occasion to transform the obscure traces of a violent and traumatic past. Residues and traces of violence continue to circulate throughout our societies. Art works toward an ethical space where we are allowed to encounter traces of the pain of others through forms that inspire in our heart's mind feeling and knowledge. It adds an ethical quality to the act of witnessing (Evans, 2016, no page number)

Ettinger offers us the capacity to recognize and work together within a range of intersubjective relations, regardless of gender, identity, age or race through an approach of willing compassionate hospitality or generosity that permits entrée to multiple engagements with others. This allows for transgression of boundaries, creation of threads and traces and building of new networks and encounters that pass through or across time without freezing other participants in the encounter; thus providing an alternative framework to subject/object relations and a mastering gaze as well as the usual model of polarizing and oppositional stances within that gaze.

## SUMMARY

The last forty years of feminist discourse is only now starting to have some influence on the production of images of the male body by women.

Throughout this period diverse communities have sought recognition and space in both society and as artists and as a result there has been a gradual, sometimes painful, development of a more nuanced understanding of each individual's place in the world. Feminist discourse highlighted the discrepancies in a Western social context and other groups, ethnicities, races, people have extended the initial discussion to include and recognize difference extensively within the world community.

There is still a need to further develop our understanding of intersubjective relations between people and in the following chapters the work of several female artists will be analysed through the lens of Ettinger's concept of the matrixial gaze. The aim of the thesis is to demonstrate how the selected works present a new paradigm for a gaze which is non-oppositional in nature. This abnegation of an adversarial position of the viewer and viewed, which implies weakness and lack, effectively responds to Betterton's call to arms about identifying a female approach to making images of the male body which aligns with her suggestion that women are seeking to develop practices that transgress boundaries and engage with the world (2004, p. 2). It also provides both female and male artists and audience, with an option which allows an empathetic viewpoint and vehicle for a creative practice through partial and shared subjectivity.



## CHAPTER 2: FASCINANCE, DURATION AND HISTORY IN THE PAINTINGS OF SYLVIA SLEIGH

I and non-I share co-response-ability when a non-I co-responds in compassionate hospitality to an I who bathes in this resonant atmosphere by way of fascinace. In the aesthetical practice which is artworking, an ethical working-through occurs as long as subjective emergence is woven within a trans-subjective pulsative borderspace. This openness between an I in fascinace and a m/Othernal compassionate agency paves the way toward openness to the Cosmos (Ettinger, 2005 p. 708)

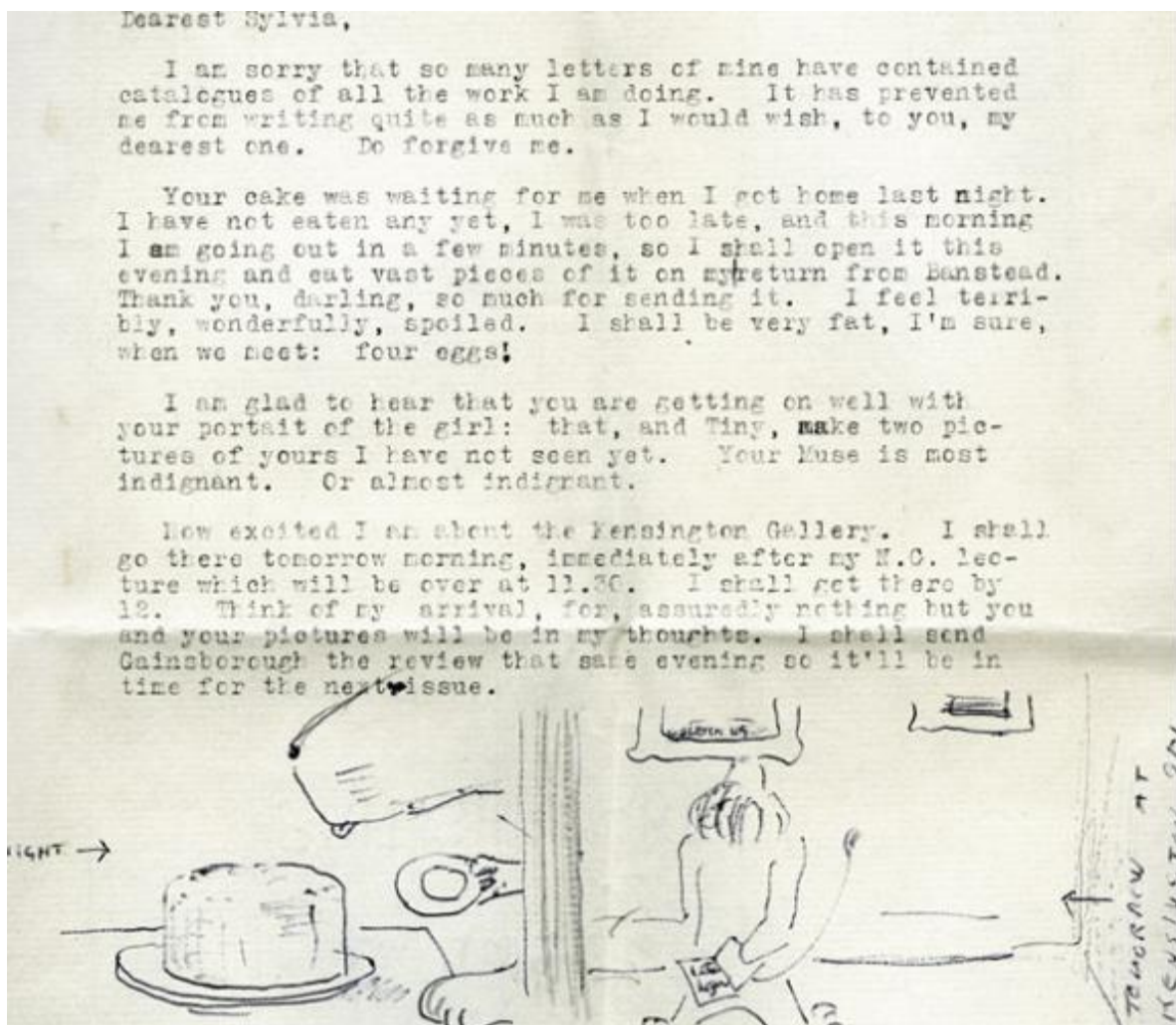


Figure 2: Letter Lawrence Alloway to Sylvia Sleigh, April 2, 1950 The Getty Research Institute, 2004.M.4. Gift of Sylvia Sleigh and the Estate of Sylvia Sleigh

This chapter evaluates the work of Sylvia Sleigh, with regard to her treatment of the male figure in her painting and analyses how fascinace occurs in this work through various painterly strategies. As noted in Chapter One, there are several elements to the matrixial gaze which support metramorphosis and transformative borderlinking in encounters between people, and Sleigh particularly utilizes time and duration to create such linkages and threads in many aspects of her work. Ettinger uses the term “fascinace” to identify how duration might be a means to create an environment and space for creation of borderlinks and for the process of metramorphic exchange to take place.

## FASCINANCE

Fascinace, which includes duration, is a key element within the process of transformational metramorphosis and the creation of borderlinks between people within an encounter. It is also important in the act of co-poïesis or aesthetical co-making. Ettinger says that duration is essential to transform each participant in creative meetings and in creating a hospitable environment to support such transformations (2005). Within the context of the creation of art or an artistic encounter this involves the artist, their material, the sitter or model and the audience, or others, where time is prolonged, memories and traces are evoked and built upon and the time of the encounter assists to generate threads and new thoughts. Ettinger provides that:

In aesthetical working through, the artist transforms time and space of an encounter event into matrixial screen and gaze, and offers the other via compassionate hospitality an occasion for fascinace (2005, p. 703)

Amelia Jones recognizes this where she identifies that the artist:

[encounters] materials working with them over time, and turning them into something we call art; and by the interpreter who like the artist herself, continuously encounters, rethinks and renews what the work “is” or can be through a process of engaging with the work’s latency (2012, p. 187)

In Ettinger’s own work, as discussed in Chapter One, this is manifest through the creation of images associated with traumatic social history and personal family histories as well as mythological themes (the Eurydice series). She is extending the duration of the historical encounter and creating new and transformed traces of it into the present, whilst providing openings to take the new threads into the future. The audience takes the trace and moves it on past the original idea through their own memories and conceptualizations. Ettinger says that:

The artist in the matrixial dimension is wit(h)ness in com-passionate hospitality. The viewer, and this partially includes the artist in her unconscious viewer position is a wit(h)ness in fascinace. The viewer will embrace while transforming traces of the event and will continue to weave metamorphic borderlinks to others, present and archaic, cognized and uncognized appealing from the future, from the past or from an unrealized virtuality 2005, p. 710

All of the participants in the encounter are exposed to the flow of time and within it, weave and create new links to each other, the artist and the work.

Ettinger identifies fascinace as “the aesthetical duration of affective and effective participation within a transformational subjectivizing potentiality



of a matrixial link” (2005, p. 707) which prolongs and delays the time of an encounter event. This requires each person to be open to the trans-subjective interactions that might occur and also embrace a state of, in Ettinger’s words, “compassionate hospitality” to occur in order to allow the creation of new understandings and threads. She says that:

Fascinace can take place only if borderlinking with-in a real, virtual, traumatic or phantasmic encounter-event meets with compassionate hospitality arriving from the other (as m/Other). It is the ripening of a transformational potentiality in a matrixial prolongation of a time of co-emergence with and in a sensitive image, sound, touch, move, breath etc. (2005, p. 707)

Fascinace is brought about through prolongation of an encounter and within a state of generous and open being; extended into creative practice. Ettinger writes that “artworking, like psychoanalytical healing of long duration, is a compassionate encounter-event of prolonged generosity” (2005, p. 707)

Sylvia Sleigh, I believe, exemplifies fascinace in some degree through her long-term practice working with the figure, and for this research in particular: the male body. There are several aspects of her work that bring the idea of fascinace and duration into prominence including: the use of the trope of a muse which dates back to Greek and Roman times; the use of history paintings as a means to make commentary on a particular cultural practice largely dominated by male artists and reworking those ideas; the time taken to work with the individual through painted portraiture; which engenders a sense of compassionate and generous engagement with her

sitters; mythological themes embedded within the history paintings and finally the ongoing engagement that the viewer has with her work.

The use of a muse provides a sense of historical longevity for Sleigh as well as establishing a means of depicting the male nude in a non-objectifying manner. Sleigh has subverted the usual relationship of male artist to the female model (or sometimes lover), by establishing the role of female artist with her male muse. The context here is that she is attempting to develop a visual language to depict the male nude, allowing for an erotic frisson whilst producing non-objectifying imagery of the male body, yet still with visions that express her passionate regard of the other.

## THE MUSE

The concept of a Muse or Muses is an archaic one first formally recognized by the Greek poet Hesiod in the fourth or fifth century BC. He describes them as being daughters of Memory and “lovely is the sound they produce from their mouths as they sing and celebrate the ordinances and the good ways of the immortals” (Spentzou, 2002, p. 2). Spentzou also suggests that they have been:

Clothed in a cloud of mystery, often evoked in passing references, metonymical descriptions, symbolic representations, they have visited poems and art persistently and with assurance unfailingly engaging artistic and poetic imagination ever since (2002, p. 1).

The Muse then, is a long established cultural meme which has been part of Western cultural values for over 2000 years. Originally it was used as a

means of identifying and elevating the way in which the artist or narrator was associated with divinely inspired authority.

Spentzou also says that from its earliest beginnings, this concept of a group of Muses underwent changes in cultural value, significance and meaning; evolving from the position of divinities, which in some mysterious way inspired men to action, to useful literary devices used by poets and sometimes for political leverage. This capacity to grow in line with artistic self-awareness or increasing revelation of the self within the process of making, demonstrates that the Muse changes in direct alignment with changing cultural mores. This allows for a range of artistic responses and interpretations which appears to open up an avenue for the female artist to have the equivalent male muse.

Traditionally the Muse has been exclusively associated with the feminine principle which, ironically, penetrates the male artist's psyche; in turn generating the production of an artistic response:

Woman being the very substance of man's poetic work, it is understandable that she would appear as his inspiration: the Muses are women. A Muse mediates between the creator and his inspiration whence he must draw. Woman's spirit is profoundly sunk in nature, and it is through her that man will sound the depths of silence and of the fecund night. A Muse creates nothing by herself; she is a calm, wise, Sibyl putting herself with docility at the service of the master (De Beauvoir, 1978, p. 182).

It might be argued that by stamping a female persona onto the construct of a Muse, masculine culture has not only kept a firm hold on its nature and value but also blocked women from tapping into such a concept.

There is seemingly a close alignment between the rendition of the nude, usually female, body by male artists and ownership of the muse. However, according to Spentzou, the Muse has kept pace with cultural changes, value systems and awareness (2002, p. 1). It might not be too outlandish to suggest that while in psychoanalytic terms the Muse is a projection of the anima for a male artist or the “Other” in Lacanian terms, there is no reason why the female artist should not be able to tap into her own version of the muse, animus or other.

Within a feminist context, there appears to be little interest in either being a muse or engaging with the concept of a male muse. Much of the discourse is about recovering of the female body, identification of feminine language and tropes and trying to establish a recognizable position and state within a cultural context. The male muse is barely there at all. This is exemplified by De Beauvoir’s description of the muse as passive and unable to do anything on her own, which describes the accepted, patriarchal, norm. Conversely Allen and Young (1989) play on the concept of a ‘thinking muse’, which proposes that the traditionally female object of male fantasy, *can* think, has a life of her own and aspirations about her own creative life. Again this is about recovery of a feminine space, and identification of a female world view, language and culture, not about extending the female artist’s boundaries to the male body or expressing desire about such a body. It is about the female body and psyche.

The photographer Zoë Leonard asks, “do I want to be Picasso or do I want to be one of these beautiful women?”, expressing the ever present

dichotomy that women experience with regard to the whole artistic experience, where on one hand there is a drive to create and on the other to be desired (Cottingham, 1993, transcript p. 64-77). A response to this equivocation is evidenced in the work of the painter Sylvia Sleigh who, as a female artist painting the male body extensively throughout her career, subverts the idea of a Muse by suggesting that a muse can have male or female attributes depending on circumstances and personal orientation, and by revealing the male body in a more mundane somatic form she brings it into an attainable state of being. She demonstrates a practice which depicts the male body as a desirable but not objectified being, and through painting her particular Muse and numerous young male sitters or models that perform the role of muse without being lovers.

Fascinence is brought into play here as the muse is such a long standing trope, both culturally and in terms of Sleigh's reworking of the idea. She is carrying the concept forward, reinterpreting it and using it to respond to contemporary issues of her time. The muse leaves traces throughout history and Sleigh, though the duration of her practice at an individual painting level and the full body of her work with the male muse, continues the historical longevity of this meme.

## THE LOVER AND THE MUSE

Second wave feminist theory in the 1970s focussed on reclaiming and recolonising the female body and image in response to its appropriation by masculine social and cultural morés. However, with the exception of a few

feminist artists such as Carolee Schneemann, there was a hesitation or reluctance about portraying the male nude in an overtly sexualized or erotic manner in order to avoid objectification of the body. McCarthy suggests too, that Sleigh might have been viewed by some of her colleagues as “colluding with the enemy” (1989, p. 149) insofar as she sought to present images of the nude which expressed sexual desire. Consequently her work provides substantial insight into how the relationship between artist and model or lover colours production of erotic works about the male body and how the problem of depicting such images within a feminist milieu has been dealt with.

I was inspired by [feminist art historian] Linda Nochlin to paint an ‘answer’ to Ingres’s famous toads – I wanted to show how I felt women should have been painted with dignity and individuality- not as sex objects (Sleigh cited by Latimer, 2013, p. 101).<sup>7</sup>

Sylvia Sleigh also wanted to create history paintings, ones that reflected her times and the important figures of her era. The fact that we are still reflecting on her work nearly forty years later, indicates that she did produce work that has remained current and of interest to two generations of artists. More importantly, she has provided an answer to Ingres’ *Odalisques* and the feminist call to produce art about the male nude from the female perspective. In doing so, she initiated one the earliest responses to such a clarion and continued working in the genre until 2010. Using history paintings as a medium to reference previous images of female nudity she is able to reflect and comment on the nature of the male nude.

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<sup>7</sup> By toads she means the series of figures of pale voluptuous women in Ingres’ *The Turc Bain*.

As Latimer notes “[Sleigh’s] realist portraits of the city’s art world intelligentsia and beautiful, nude young men made her both a visual historian of her cultured, refined milieu and a seemingly retrograde iconoclast within it” (2013, p. 104). This is partly because Sleigh persistently worked outside the prevailing abstraction of her time, using realistic figuration to explore and resolve her interests.

As exemplars of early contextual impetus for later works, paintings such as *The Bride* (1949) and *Nude Portrait of Allan Robinson* (1968) (Figures 3 and 4) evidence her early interest in the non-idealized male figure, as well as a quietly affectionate regard and sense of companionable proximity.

Although *The Bride*, (1949) is outside the research parameters in the sense that it is not a nude and it is definitely pre-1970, there are some interesting layers within it that provide genesis of later works. Lawrence Alloway, her husband, is depicted in women’s clothing, channelling Frida Kahlo and possibly Marcel Duchamp as Rose Selavy<sup>8</sup>. Although he is not physically naked, he is psychologically open, evidencing trust in the artist to allow her to paint him dressed as a woman and representing such a damaged and famous figure. Not only is Alloway willing to play with ideas of gender and role, dominance and power; he also demonstrates trust in Sleigh, his lover, to depict him in such a fashion. He takes on the softness of the female model, while decorative touches of material and beading curling around his head, reference traditionally, womanly domestic tasks and crafts. He allows

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<sup>8</sup> Duchamp was photographed by Man Ray in 1921 wearing women’s clothing and took on the alter ego Rose Selavy, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/oct/27/art.surrealismatthevanda>

this portrayal without fear of ridicule and Sleigh completes it in the same sense of exultant creative wonder, shifting the boundaries between them and “portraying men in feminine situations” (Sleigh, interview not dated but pre 2010). This ambiguity with gender and role is explored in later works such *Philip Golub Reclining*, (1971) where the male figure is “so young he could be male or female [which] blurs the distinction between male and female, and in doing so records a countercultural strategy to question gendered appearances” (McCarthy, 1998, p. 157). This painting also provides the context and background for much of her work throughout the body of her career.



Figure 3: Sylvia Sleigh, *The Bride*, 1949, oil on canvas, 610 x508 cm, estate of Sylvia Alloway



In *Nude Portrait of Allan Robinson* (1968) a man is languidly and decorously spread across a sheepskin rug. The restful ease of his position in an intimate domestic interior suggests repose, comfort, and familiarity with the artist and the situation. The soft palette and subtle colouration settles him deeply into the background so that he is at one with the ground; his head and torso highlighted by darker tonal line work so that they take prominence. This is supported by the cool blue of the pillow pushing his face and his expression forward, ensuring they are viewed as important elements of the painting. The formal structure of a predominantly horizontal plane accentuates the sense of quiet repose, but his carefully resolved hand and the vertical shadowing of the couch beneath him bring the gaze of the spectator back to his pubis. This continually moves the eye between the particulars of his face and the pink, highlighted skin of his penis. His legs are almost incidental but do serve to elongate and stretch the bodily plane across the canvas.



Figure 4: Sylvia Sleigh, *Nude Portrait of Allan Robinson*, 1968, oil on canvas, 86.4 x 182.9cm, image from Freymond-Guth Gallery

Robinson's skin is not smoothly monochrome, but is full of lilacs, mauves, greens and pinks; naturalistic colours of a human body. He is sensually portrayed without necessarily being objectified.

Overlaying the formal qualities of *Nude Portrait of Allan Robinson* are subtle and playful references to famous nude female paintings. Sleight talks about being a history painter, and she succeeded in documenting her contemporaries by being a painter of her immediate time and place.

However, many of her paintings also reflect references to other well-known historical paintings. She is incorporating traces of these works and in a way, sustaining them whilst reconsidering them. This work probably alludes to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538), Goya's *la Maja Desnuda*, (1798-1800) and, quite strongly, Manet's *Olympia* (1863). Sleight is referencing both the format and content of such works, especially as all three had scandalous associations or interpretations. She is playfully reminding the viewer of the impact that they might have had and also placing herself as a female exponent of this genre of painting in line with historical precedent, cheekily insinuating herself into a place within a pantheon of famous artists. In terms of the creation of fascinance, she is taking the original image and its attendant meanings and adding new thoughts about them, creating new borderlinks within a modern context. The original painting has been incorporated as an idea and is immediately brought to mind when Sleight references it. As a result the viewer is included and in turn reinscribes traces of both the original and the newer work.

In addition, Sleigh perhaps reminds the viewer that in all three images the woman is a central objectified subject. By reversing the roles of gazer and gazed at, the viewer is placed into a situation where we are asked to reconsider our position as spectator. As previously discussed, her stated intention at this time in her career was to create a means of imaging the male nude that would not objectify the sitter. There are several aspects of this work that might serve to highlight this, namely her interest in the non-idealized, man, soft colouration, and her intense focus on his individual and distinct facial expression, the humour or play embedded in the work, and the possibility that affection or love plays an important element in how the model is presented. Sleigh is creating a space for engaged and compassionate hospitality with her sitter here, essential according to Ettinger, to sustain fascination and co-creativity within the process of art making.

Allan Robinson's expression presents a contrast with Manet's Olympia, who gazes directly at the viewer. His gaze is not direct, nor is it coquettish. He is recognizable as a particular individual, in a relaxed languid pose, yet he also has an enigmatic, possibly pensive, expression on his face. He is not so much gazing at the viewer in a direct or challenging way as looking past them in a self-absorbed, neutral fashion, neither inviting nor repulsing the look. Given that Sleigh is trying to express how women must have felt as objects of scrutiny (McCarthy, 1998, p. 148), Robinson's expression is difficult to read. He has allowed Sleigh to portray him. He is complicit and part of the exchange of looks and as a result the image poses more

questions than answers, as if it is in a code only the artist and model know about. Again this establishes a settled interaction between the sitter and the artist and later the viewer who views the work.

An important feature of this painting is that the pubic area is not covered by the subject's hand, as it is in traditional depictions of the female figure, particularly in the case of *Olympia*. This lessens the sense of curiosity, titillation and eroticism aroused by the partial concealment of the site of sexuality that occurs in the case of the female nude. Sleigh, it seems, is deliberately revealing the sex of the man in order to prevent such curiosity and by unveiling his genitals, his whole body becomes a terrain for exploration. This theme of revelation continues throughout her ongoing practice and is, paradoxically, enhanced by the way in which she often presents the body hair of her model in detail and as a decorative feature. The whole body is important not just the sex. By carefully outlining the hair of many of her sitters, including Allan Robinson, Sleigh is inscribing and touching the entire body of each one of them.

Fiduccia (2013) suggests that Sleigh's work is not particularly erotic. However, the erotic is not so much about obvious signifiers of arousal. Perhaps there is an element of confusion about pornography and erotica here. Rather than being non-erotic as Fiduccia claims, Sleigh has discovered and expressed a different visual trope from those usually employed to signal eroticism. Effectively Fiduccia misses the fact that Sleigh employs a new, personal, language to denote Eros. Her paintings express female desire using a different language from that used to express

male desire. Ettinger suggests that through a metramorphic exchange there is a range of interactions constantly taking place between other and non-other, including erotic threads, and this allows for the building of any number of mutual responses between the artist and her model. Portrait painting particularly suits the establishment of rapport between sitter and artist, through the protracted process of working together. Again this supports the concept of fascinane, where duration and the timeless flow of the moment are sustained through the concentrated but easy rapport between the artist and her model takes place. Rosemary Betterton has also noted this phenomena and suggests that the female painter becomes involved in an intersubjective, haptic interaction with her subject. She says that “painting is a complex practice that engages with the psychic and the somatic; it is ongoing and relational” (2004, p. 7). The body and the psyche are deeply engaged in the physical process of painting and the communications that occur whilst doing so.

Clearly Sleight enjoyed painting her models, especially her favourites Paul Rosano and her husband Lawrence Alloway. Both men have been portrayed on numerous occasions throughout her career, and given the number of love letters that she and Alloway exchanged it seems that she loved him and desired him. She herself says:

[H]e usually read to me, and I thought this is my idea of Elysian fields, to paint one's beloved in a lovely setting out of doors in perfect weather- and either talk or be read to (Sylvia Sleight in Latimer, 2013, p. 101)



Figure 5: Sylvia Sleigh, *Portrait of Lawrence Alloway*, 1965, oil on canvas, 61 x 51 cm, image Freymond-Guth Gallery

Alloway, her lover, allows and invites her to look at him, the exchange is a mutually agreeable one; a desired one. He in turn writes of the delight and pleasure he feels when she reads to him, and begs her to return to him as soon as possible (Hughes, 2012) Alloway wrote love letters almost daily to Sleigh: letters full of passion and affection, invitation and desire and in the paintings in which he is depicted, there appear to be small coded pointers to this love exchange. A book placed near his chair, symbol of their reading aloud together, tousled clothing or none at all, him naked in bed, or in a garden alone or with friends. They are co-makers, and engaged in the act of co-poësis. This is seen in one of her early portraits of her muse. He is



clothed but slightly dishevelled, and in the background Sleigh portrays herself naked reflected in a mirror. *Portrait of Lawrence Alloway* (1965) (Figure 5) depicts him seated in a stylish designer chair, his shirt undone to the waist, a slight smile on his face as he observes the viewer. It is what is unsaid, and unrevealed here, that evokes curiosity and suggests erotic attraction between artist and model. She is both the artist and participant in the work. This serves to render her as both the gazer and the documenter of the relationship between artist and muse.

Berger suggests that, when a male artist and his model or muse are lovers he is less likely to objectify the female nude, (1972, p. 51) and he proposes that Rembrandt's depictions of his wife either nude or in amorous moments, effectively blocks out any other gazer: "She is mine" the artist is saying "see what she looks like, only I can look at her and make love to her". Sleigh is doing much the same thing. She depicts Alloway slightly tousled and reveals herself naked in the background, suggesting that they have been making love - or are they just about to? The act of painting him is one where she can prolong her scrutiny, undress him or not and engage in an intimate exchange; relate to him. The duration of the exchange establishes timeless lingering fascination for the couple. By placing herself into the frame, she reminds the viewer of her relationship to the model and her quiet revelation of herself in an intimate situation. Interestingly, as he is not naked, there is possibly some sense of the hidden and implicit embedded in this work. It is also possible that Sleigh is being very careful about revealing his body to the gaze of other viewers, perhaps suggesting

that only she is allowed to look at him, or more importantly this is about being sensitive to his privacy and not using him in an objectified manner.

Similarly *Lawrence in Bed (Ditchling)* (1959) also reveals an intimate encounter, but here Sleigh has chosen to cover her lover from the midsection, hiding his genitals. So although there is a distinctly erotic tenor and the implication of sexuality, by the use of the bed as the frame, Alloway is sensitively portrayed and carefully dealt with. In addition, the soft, light palette emphasises the low key, quiet eroticism of the portrait, and the flowery bedding also suggests a very feminine environment.



Figure 6: Sylvia Sleigh, *Lawrence in Bed (Ditchling)*, 1959, oil on canvas, dimensions not stated, estate of Sylvia S. Alloway, image from Sylvia Sleigh website



The use of these domestic interiors and beautiful gardens are also markers of her relationship to her muse: he is inside her domain. Such places are intimate signifiers of a private woman's life and suggest a hospitable atmosphere or the use of the compassionate hospitality important in the metramorphic exchange. Most of her paintings have detailed depictions of stylish interiors which reinforce the idea of a lush, opulent and beautiful hidden world where she is able to spend time with her paramour. It is a private, rich, relaxed place; a fantasy. Her attention to the details of this stylish bohemian life constantly reinforces the idea that the domestic and hidden world is of key importance to her. So not only are we given obvious images of these interiors but we are made aware of the fact that the process of working with her muse took place in them. She creates an environment suitable to work with the sitter and to sustain her own interest and enjoyment while doing so. This is essential in the conduct of co-poïesis and for the fascinace which opens up the way for carriage and generation of threads and metramorphic links.

## THE MODELS

Sleigh's pleasure in depicting the beautiful male body is also evident when depicting her other favourite models Paul Rosano and Philip Golub as seen in the early work *Philip Golub Reclining* (1971). Although Alloway is definitely her Muse, other people take on that role and inspire her towards depicting representations of men she likes or enjoys. McCarthy suggests that:

Sleigh speaks of a desire to conceive of painting as a record of, and perhaps even a trace of, or substitute for, an imagined love affair. However, this affair bypasses consummation for a never-fulfilled and therefore perpetual longing in which the eye gazes upon its beloved (1998, p. 158).

This longing, as well as an interest in bending of gender roles, is manifest in the Velasquez (1647) inspired painting of the nubile, ephebic youth, Philip Golub.



Figure 7: Sylvia Sleigh, *Philip Golub Reclining*, 1971, oil on canvas, 107 x 1580 cm, private collection, image Sylvia Sleigh website

Where the original work, Velasquez', *The Toilet of Venus* (1647), places the Venus figure admiring herself in a mirror held up by a cupid, Sleigh acts as both the mirror, by painting the boy, and the cupid (McCarthy, 1998 p. 158). This softens the positional ascendancy she has within the frame by making such a playful allusion. She said that she wanted to create a painting of a beautiful man/boy and within that she demonstrates that not only can she produce a non-objectified image but does so in a gentle and playful manner. She says:

[H]e was 16 and 3/4 and most beautiful, not quite a child, yet not a man...I wanted to make him so delicious that every woman who saw the painting would want him (McCabe, 1974, p. 223).<sup>9</sup>

There is also a subversive frisson here in the sense that Sleigh is a much older woman depicting a younger man. The usual cliché of the older male artist and the younger woman is reversed. Whether this is a deliberate choice by Sleigh or a quirk of fate, it still builds on the playful eroticism, and slightly irreverent nature of her work. This might explain why the beautiful young man, Paul Rosano, is also featured in her work as regularly as her husband Lawrence.

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<sup>9</sup> Whether this is successful or not is up to each individual viewer.



Figure 8: Sylvia Sleigh, *Paul Rosano Seated Nude*, 1973, oil on canvas, 142.2 x 106.6 cm, Collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, image Freymond-Guth Gallery.

*Paul Rosano Seated Nude*, (Figure 5) evidences her appreciation of his whole persona. He is placed quite regally and centrally in a designer chair on sumptuous skins, distinctly situated within a beautiful domestic interior. Once again the colour range is quite muted and soft, the central placement of her muse is quite formal and commanding, which contrasts with his nakedness. His facial expression is intense and contained and he is looking directly at the artist and the spectator so that he maintains his

self-possession and authority. He is full of masculine beauty and strength which indicates that Sleigh recognizes and validates his phallic power. He is certainly not an objectified figure passively posing, as his intense look straight back at the viewer prevents that. Although we are free to gaze, we are made aware of the incursion.

There are also references to Renaissance paintings, gardens and figures; Rosano could easily be a depiction of Lorenzo di Medici with his intensely dark expression and highly coiffed hairstyle. He is the epitome of 1970s male chic.

The manifest and obvious imagery is underpinned by other, possibly coded, layers. He is a hirsute man, and traditionally hairiness has been associated with animality and sexuality. In this work it serves to highlight his erotic qualities. This is supported by his hairy body and the sheepskin beneath him which also ensures that his tanned body is visually driven forward. He exudes stylized and contained animal sexiness. His pose in a linear and strong vertical alignment suggests that the whole body signifies the phallus. The revelation of the male figure in such a way places his sexuality and physicality “on show” without artifice. It also lessens the secretive voyeuristic potential of the image as he is so lacking in coquetry or coyness and tends to be looking back so strongly that it is less possible to feel in a superior position to him, especially as he seems to be looking down at the viewer. This is reinforced in many other paintings Sleigh made of him. *Paul Rosano Reclining* (1973) (Figure 6) follows the same erotic tenor.



Rosano is carefully, but artfully posed on a soft pink, silky-looking quilt, bringing to mind the association of a bed or going to bed. His body is open and fully revealed in all its 1970s hirsute glory while he looks at the artist and spectator with the vestige of a smile - an invitation to look and play. What could Sleigh have been thinking when she was observing him and painting him, something about being given permission to be a voyeur perhaps? Everything about this painting is couched in eroticism. She says “I hardly ever paint people unless I’m rather in love with them” which suggests not that she is erotically involved but enjoys their presence and the act of painting and clearly she enjoys Rosano (McCarthy, 1998 p. 158).



Figure 9: Sylvia Sleigh, *Paul Rosano Reclining*, 1973, oil on canvas, 137 x 198 cm, image source Freymond-Guth Gallery

The way in which he is framed, arrayed and so completely on display, allowing us to look, provokes the inevitable thought of the continuum from looking to touching. The association of quilts and bed, love making, and the colour make this work opulent and erotic. Each hair is carefully articulated, while each element of his face and expression is depicted to ensure he is a fully recognizable individual person, not a composite figure or an idealized dream man. He is both a sexual body and a known being. Sleigh is lifting him up and articulating him as an epitome of beauty, his hair a magnificent bouffant frizz of Afro. His eyes are those of an Egyptian king and his phallus strong and well formed, embodying the idea of phallic majesty and the associated powerful nature of its strength and beauty (Bordo, 1999). There is a sense too that he is partly aroused, as his penis is certainly not in a retracted state. Even his placement across the canvas is full of suppressed energy; he is looked at and returning the look. His whole body could be viewed as representing phallic strength. The size of the painting also highlights this sense of immersive interactive involvement between artist, sitter (or more appropriately recliner) and the audience.<sup>10</sup>

The gaze here is flowing in and out of the frame. Rosano is not necessarily unhappy about revealing himself. Although he is effectively underneath the artist and spectator viewer, he seems to be comfortable to be the subject of Sleigh's scrutiny, especially as he appears in many of her paintings. There

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<sup>10</sup> This continues through the audience. I saw this work in Sydney in 2016 and spent two hours just looking at it, taking notes, drawing it, absorbing the work. Throughout this experience I was aware of the original painter working with her sitter and was deeply engrossed with the painting. Forty years before Sylvia Sleigh had stood back from it and seen the finished work, probably chatted to others about it, and now I was there with it also. A friend saw the work a few weeks later and we talked about our response to it, each of us threading new thoughts, considering it, weaving new narratives and drawing it through forty years of our history.

is an exchange of look between the artist and sitter in these and in other works such as *Double Portrait of Paul Rosano*, (1974) (Figure 7), which also demonstrates quite a strong sense of engagement and exchanges of energy. While she seems to enjoy the protracted observation and creation of images of both Paul and Lawrence, they seem to return and savour her look. The inclusion of extensive and meticulous detail in all of the paintings indicates that Sleigh enjoyed the whole experience of painting these men. She was able to spend hours carefully observing and documenting them, looking deeply while talking with them. The whole nature of such a practice is one of a heightened and sumptuous ambience, an almost theatrical scene. The whole experience is, seemingly immersive and sensual, and forms a sustained and ongoing conduction of fascination.

*Double Portrait of Paul Rosano*, (1974) once again demonstrates her keen interest in his personal beauty by duplicating it and ensuring he is seen from both front and rear. We are given a full exposure to his whole body and the opportunity to take in all elements of his figure. By using contrasting light and dark tones she enhances the impact of the frontal image of the body and the tan lines at the groin serve to draw the eye to his midriff and penis. Again nothing is hidden and his whole body is a field for erotic desire and although he is quite hirsute this enhances rather than detracts from his sensuality.



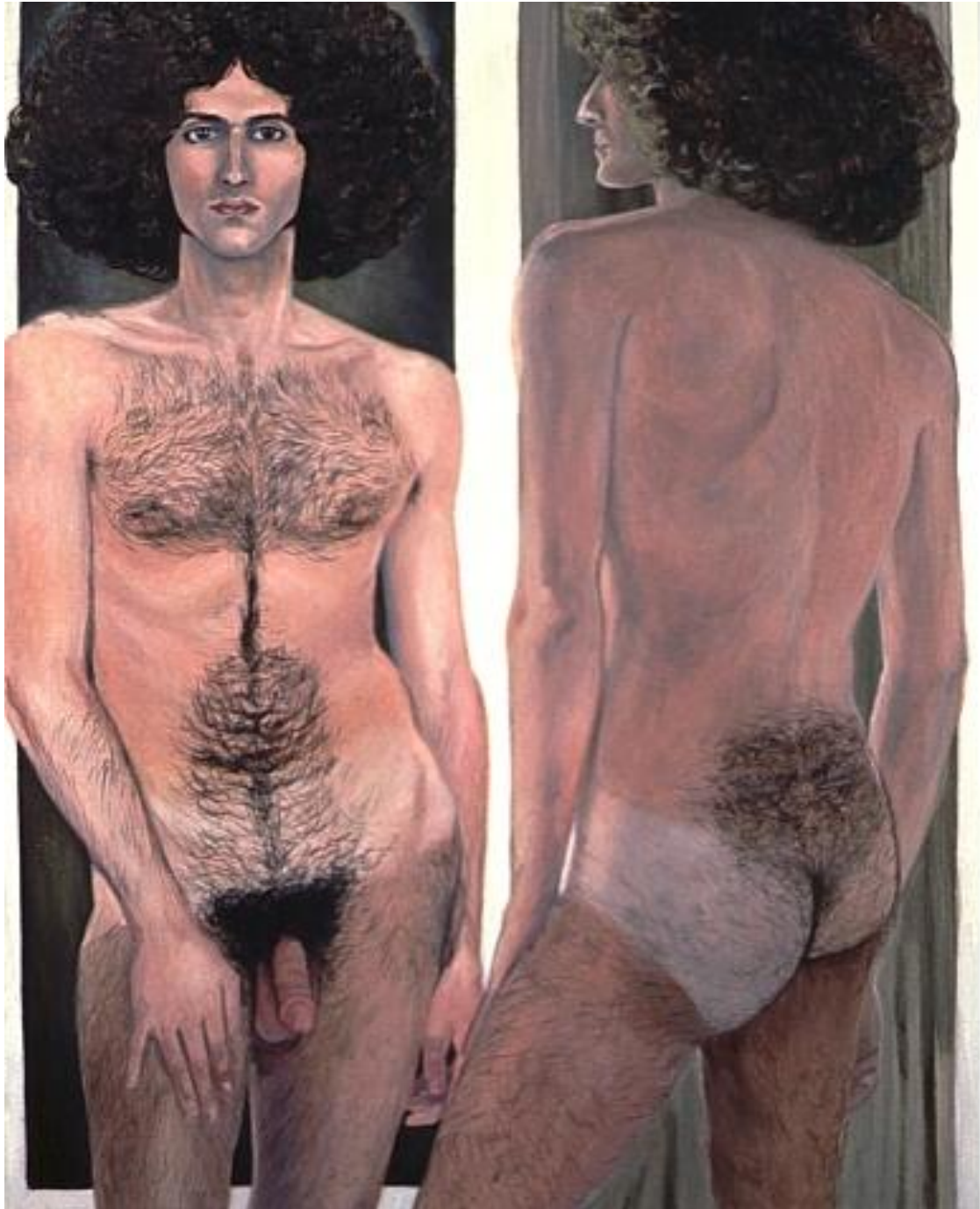


Figure 10: Sylvia Sleigh, *Double Portrait of Paul Rosano*, 1974, oil on canvas, dimensions unstated, image Blufton.edu



Figure 11: Sylvia Sleigh, *At The Turkish Bath*, 1976, oil on canvas, 193 x 254 cm, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, source Sylvia Sleigh website

Where the individual portraits appear to have particularly intimate resonances occurring between the artist and the muse, the group portraits also carry elements of playful intimacy and narrative. This is evident in *At The Turkish Bath*, (1976) (Figure 11), which uses historical references as well as individual portrayals of Sleigh's friends and colleagues carefully placed in prominent and significant roles. More importantly, both Sleigh's husband and her putative muse are depicted in this painting.

Linda Nochlin said, with regards to women depicting the naked male figure:

Equally unthinkable would be such an egregiously erotopia as the Turkish Bath, populated by sloe-eyed, close-pressed, languid youths and painted by an octenagerian Mme. Ingres (1973, p. 10).

As noted, this comment provided the impetus for Sleigh to respond with her own version of Ingres' picture *The Turkish Bath* (le Bain turc) (1852-59 and modified 1862) with the specific intention of providing an alternative, non-objectifying vision to Ingres' eroticized fantasy.

Sleigh uses the domestic interior here not only to provide a sense of luxurious style by referencing Ingres' painting, but also as a symbolic pointer. Lawrence Alloway, almost in a reversed pose of Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* (1814), has his foot on a starry rug, his toe pointing to Paul Rosano dreamily strumming his guitar. Rosano, in turn, is placed on a dark blue towel which highlights the shape of his buttocks. This image both refers to Ingres' *The Bather of Valpinçon*, (1808) and the mandolin player in *The Turkish Bath*. Quiet but persistent visual cues, such as the star beneath Alloway's foot draw the eye through the painting, but as the star image is quite strong it tends to inexorably return the viewer to him, suggesting he is Sleigh's own "bright star" (Keats, 1795-1821). Likewise the slight, pale highlight on his flank and bright clear eyes ensures that he takes on a luminous quality. The same line extends to Rosano's guitar beading and also extends up the thigh of the second Rosano figure linking them all together. This might indicate that both men are substantially important to Sleigh.

The other figures are almost handmaidens/men to Alloway and Rosano, although each one of the figures in this painting is clearly defined and an identifiable portrait of the sitter. All face different directions or in a particular manner to give them something of their own personality or

stance. This is exemplified in the figure of Scott Burton (second from the left) who is kneeling on a fake fur tiger skin rug. He is very still-looking and has a neutral facial expression, but the orange colour of the rug draws the eye to his groin. It is possible that Sleigh is quietly playing with the idea of him being a tiger, alluding to his animal sexual nature. While the figures are all treated as distinct personae, her particular favourites are lovingly outlined and carefully resolved each time she works with them. Alloway in particular, at the forefront of the painting, is looking at the artist in a rather “sloe-eyed” way, exchanging some especially piquant looks with the artist.



Figure 12: Sylvia Sleigh, *At The Turkish Bath* detail of Lawrence Alloway, 1976

In this work, Sleigh is revisiting the Ingres picture and in doing so re-establishes the original work, allowing us to recall it whilst adding her contemporaries into the scene. The historical duration of the Ingres painting is reinforced and at the same time renewed; we are placed within an encounter that develops new tendrils of thought and vision, which together shift us through time through fascination.

*Mitchell Fredericks by the Fountain* (1981) (Figure 13) is thematically contiguous with her Alloway and Rosano series and continues with imagery realized in the earlier works. Overlaying the eroticism and affection she reveals in these works is a further development of a commentary about man and nature. She reverses the usual association of women and nature and man with culture and begins to provide, or suggest perhaps, what might happen if man were to be transposed into what is usually seen as a feminine role. This occurs to various degrees in some of the Rosano works, such as *Maureen Conner and Paul Rosano: Venus and Mars, "Annunciation"* (1974) (Figure 14), *Paul Rosano* (1975) (Figure 15), and often in plein air works.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Such as *The Court of Pan (after Signorelli)* (1973) and *The Garden* (1976).





Figure 13: Sylvia Sleigh, *Mitchell Fredericks by the Fountain*, 1981, oil on canvas, 91.4 x 111.7 cm, image source Freymond-Guth Gallery

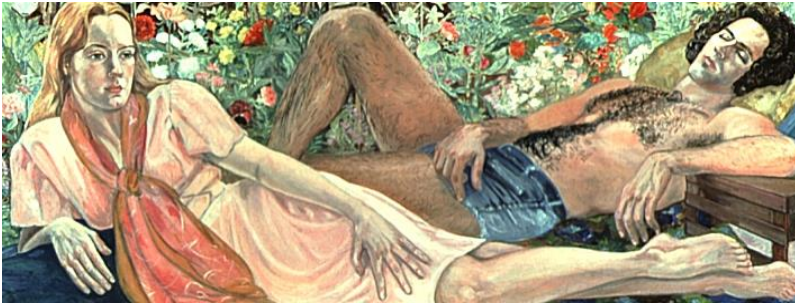


Figure 14: Sylvia Sleigh, *Maureen Conner and Paul Rosano: Venus and Mars*, 1974 oil on canvas, dimensions not stated, Freymond-Guth Gallery

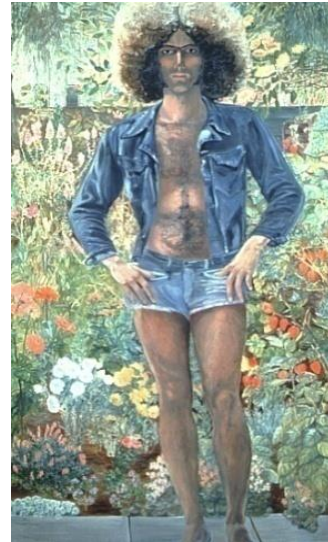


Figure 15: Sylvia Sleigh, *Annunciation "Paul Rosano"*, 1975, oil on canvas, dimensions not stated

Sleigh's insertion of the male figure into natural settings and the implied placement of herself as cultural arbiter and artist, is lightly playful yet has an underlying commentary about the role of the artist and model, the nature of the gaze and the position of the female artist in such an interaction. Ettinger also proposes that through fascinance and transformation, each of us is opening up to one another, as the models here are doing, but also to the wider natural world, the Cosmos (2005, p. 708). The decorative and rich background of flowers and plants seem to embrace the figures and are intrinsic to the placement of the body in the frame: literal tendrils that thread out of the picture.

Two paintings produced a few years apart evidence the interest Sleigh has in the transposition of the male figure into a natural setting. *Robert Lucy in a Grove*, (1991) (Figure 16) and *Pluto, Robert Lucy* (1999) (Figure 17) both depict the naked figure of the artist Robert Lucy within a sylvan context.

Not only is the content of these works pertinent to Sleigh's ongoing interest

in positional reversal of the female artist and male model but the titles provide a key to where she is gently moving the viewer.

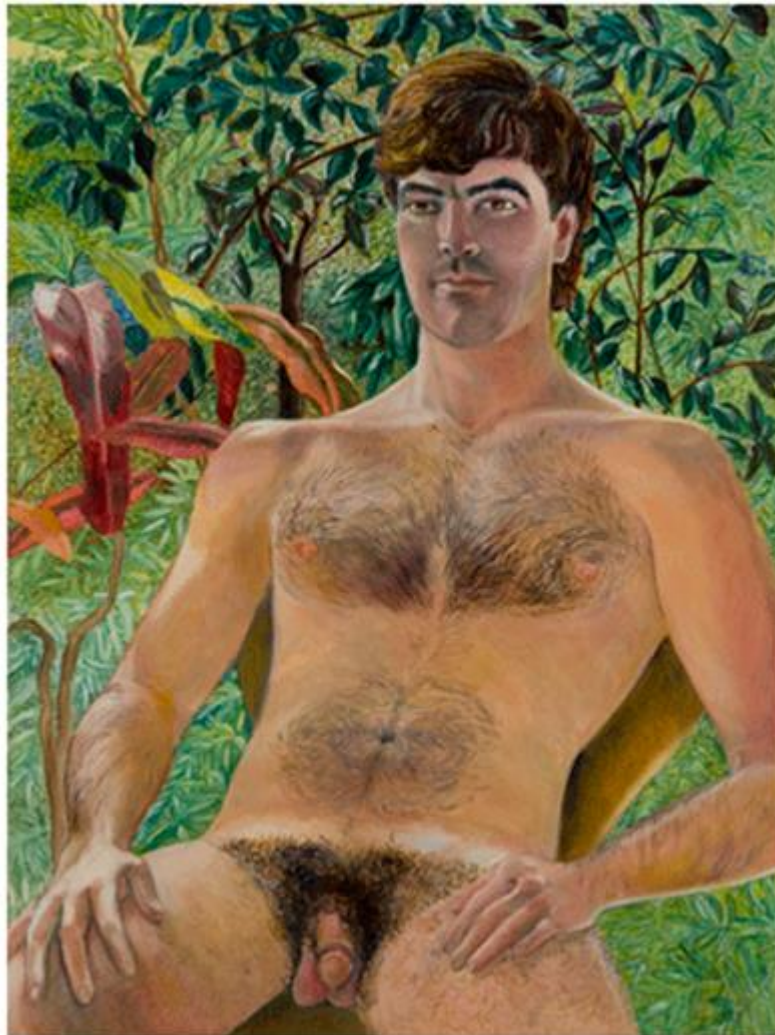


Figure 16: Sylvia Sleigh, *Robert Lucy in a Grove*, 1991, oil on canvas, 193 x 76.2 cm, image source Freymond-Guth Gallery

The mythological god Pluto is associated with the underworld, death, rebirth and, by his relationship with Persephone; agriculture. He also has links to underground wealth and mineral riches. The grove aspect is concerned with healing and renewal. Sleigh is proposing here a set of powerful natural tropes which suggests that the male figure can easily be transformed into a strong, masculine yet natural figure. She is also



providing an example of fascination through her use of an ancient mythological trope.

The model in both these paintings is depicted within garden settings. *Robert Lucy in a Grove* is particularly rich in decorative pattern, colouration and his placement within the space. He fills the canvas and extends beyond the border almost directly at the viewer, so that he seems close and intimately connected to the spectator. The seemingly reduced distance between the sitter and the viewer enhances the atmosphere of intimacy. Augmenting this closeness is Lucy's wide stance. His body is fully opened and revealed to the gaze, yet he is relaxed and allowing that observation and exchange of looks, secure and strong within the moment. In common with other, previously discussed, works he is not coquettish in any way. There is nothing hidden and he invites and allows scrutiny. Effectively this painting suggests an increased intimacy between the artist and subject, without necessarily implying that there is a sexual relationship, which establishes both a rapport between the two people and allows for an energetic exchange and the creation of an atmosphere which supports and encourages the development of a metamorphic transformation between the two.

Formally the tangle of dark leaves and vines behind the sitter's head act as an ornate decorative screen highlighting or crowning his head. Again this suggests a regal presence and affirms his sexual potency and phallic power even within the, ostensibly feminine, natural setting of the garden or grove. This theme is continued in the second painting of this sitter.



Figure 17: Sylvia Sleigh, *Pluto, Robert Lucy*, 1999, oil on canvas, 228.6 x 137.1 cm, image source Freymond-Guth Gallery

In the painting *Pluto, Robert Lucy* (1999), the model is, once again, depicted in a garden-like natural setting normally associated with feminine principles. He is relaxed and poised, saturnine, full of symbolic and mythological strength yet simultaneously a natural being. His lifted hip and the leather strip in his hand could refer to Donatello's statue of David (1430-1440); however, he is less effete than the ephebic boy in that statue. His look: away from the painter, outside the frame, draws the eye through the broad field of

the canvas and the path behind him also pulls the viewer into the painting – perhaps a play on being led up the garden path. One of Sleigh's late career paintings, *Max Warsh Seated Nude*, (2006) (Figure 18) returns to the themes of her earlier works, revisiting the nude and chair imagery used in *Portrait of Lawrence Alloway* (1965), *Paul Rosano Seated Nude*, (1976), *Robert Lucy in a Grove* (1991) and other paintings not analysed in this

thesis. <sup>12</sup>This work is still contiguous with her whole oeuvre, yet also seems quite pared back, almost to the extent of abstraction.

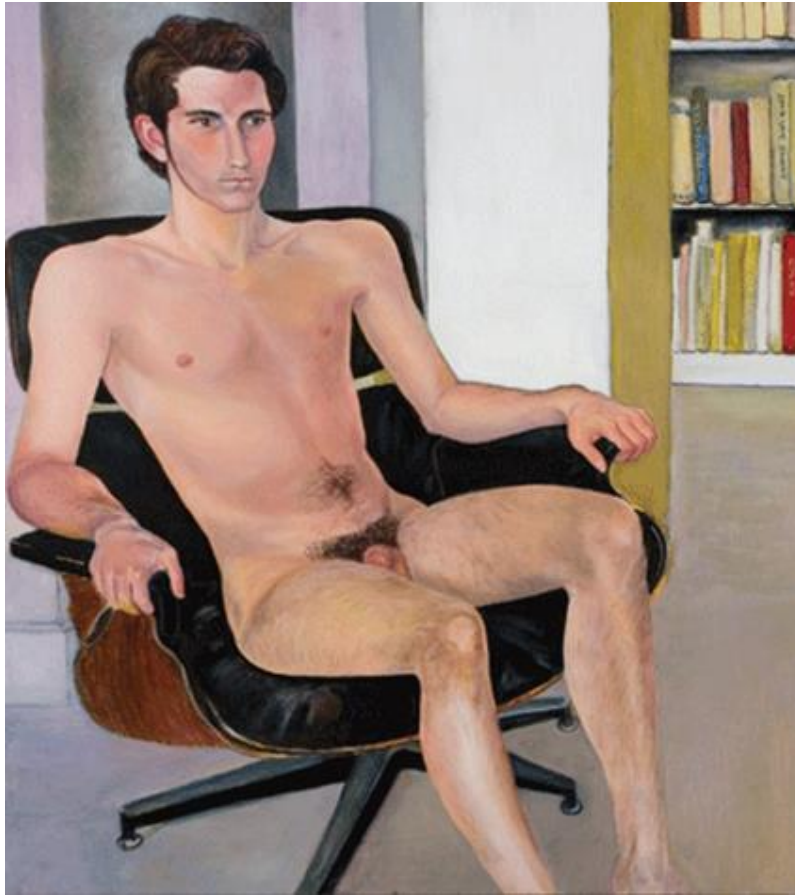


Figure 18: Sylvia Sleigh, *Max Warsh Seated Nude*, 2006, oil on canvas, 132.1 x 142.2 cm, image source Freymond-Guth Gallery

She uses a quite muted palette, an almost monochrome colour range with few decorative linear elements. Even within this muted painting there is a narrative and a targeted response to the life and interests of the sitter.

Warsh is an artist with a particular interest in language, poetry and architectural forms. Consequently the prominent placement of books, quite formally arranged, strong vertical linear blocking of the wall, lintel and

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<sup>12</sup>Other works include: *Paul Rosano in Jacobson Chair*, (1971), *Denis Adrian*, (1982), *Portrait of an Actor*; *Sean Pratt*, (1994)

background all work towards establishing a formal architecture which surrounds the man<sup>13</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

As this chapter has demonstrated, Sleigh, in her depictions of the male nude has a compassionate vision and language that carries her interests and observations into this century. Her continued, fascinated, engagement with the portrayal of the young male figure is a sustained one, extending almost to her death in 2010. This indicates that Sleigh's work is not just a quick response to a particular or discrete moment in time, but an ongoing commitment and response to the genre of the nude. It also provides evidence of a concentrated interest and fascination with the subject of the male figure. As testament to this sustained interest there have been two retrospectives of her work in recent years at Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen (2012) and Tate Liverpool (2013) respectively, and her work was also included on prominent display in the *Nude: art from the Tate collection* (2016) in Sydney.

Often the nature of the content - the male nude - can sometimes obscure really seeing the works clearly. As has been evident from my analysis of her works, Sleigh's treatment of any of the figures she paints is thoughtful and carefully articulated, individualized. Each person is observed to the highest degree where facial expression, bodily attributes and features are meticulously recorded. Her men are clearly articulated with recognizable features; they are well known people with an inner life and a human

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<sup>13</sup> Although it is not clear from this image one of the books is a Sylvia Sleigh monograph

embodiment. She also ensures that each man depicted in her work is presented in a dignified, often quite still, manner. This is also underpinned in the naming of each work in which the model is named quite clearly and respectfully. The allusion to historical narratives and artistic precedent also elevates each person to another less worldly plane. They take on a mythological aspect which overlays them with a veneer of idealization and posits them as exemplars of a good life: paragons. She could just as easily have photographed them but has chosen the lengthy and protracted process of portraiture to describe her subjects. In contrast to photography, a relatively quick documentary process, painting a portrait requires long exposure of the model to the artist, and perhaps vice versa. A descriptive figurative method is much better than abstraction when the artist really wants to look at and engage with her model. In terms of a gaze, this is an underlying theme throughout all of her works. Sleigh not only has to look at her subject for hours, even weeks, but in many cases probably desires to look. This expression of the gaze is almost a covert one, embedded as it is within the process of making. Again this represents a key factor in the durational aspect of fascinane, which sets up a situation and environment to support building of networks and links, through time. It is possible to imagine that this could be an experience where time seems to flow around the artist and her model; is simultaneously time consuming and timeless; hours might pass yet appear to take seconds.

This latter point may be a clue to the erotic content of Sleigh at her work.

Not only does a long portrait-making process require protracted analysis

and problem solving, it also encourages intimacy and rapport between the artist and model. Her interest is absorbed by the process which allows her to build trust with the model, person or lover. Her love relationship with Lawrence Alloway exemplifies this courtship and intimacy. Manacorda calls this an emotional gaze which allows for a “way of taking in the world which is extremely personal and generous” (2013). Compassionate hospitality and generosity provide the environment to develop metamorphic links and to generate fascination, and this is consistently exemplified in Sleigh’s work.

Contrary to Latimer who believes her treatment of the figure is stilted and lacking eroticism (2013, pp. 101-105), I would argue that eroticism suffuses her work. The fascination that Sleigh is engrossed in involves, in this case, the process of evaluation, scrutiny and immersion with her subject, hinting at a deeply erotic artistic experience which is, in turn, manifest in the works. This is substantiated by the comment she made about her well-known painting, *Philip Golub Reclining*, that she wanted to depict him as being so beautiful that all women would desire him (Majewski, 2003, website). If we think of each brush stroke on the canvas as a form of caress, then the works suddenly reveal a deeply intimate practice indeed. It is the process of creation that eroticises her work. She gazes and takes pleasure from that gaze. The whole setting and process of painting, intimacy and truthful communication continually builds a picture of a woman artist involved in her work in an intrinsically emotional and



engaged manner. Rosemary Betterton says that this form of painting is both somatic and intersubjective (2004, p. 4; p. 7) and she says that it:

represents a shift from practice that deals primarily as a system of signs within semiotic analysis, to a concept of painting as having an indexical relation to the world: it is simultaneously both a trace and a material presence (2004, p. 7).

As such Sleigh's work exemplifies the matrixial borderspace spoken of by Bracha Ettinger; which denotes a particular state of mind or being which encourages and allows for exchanges of energy between viewer and viewed in such a way that the gaze is not one of subject and object, but of two participants in an emotional transaction and sharing partial subjectivity. In addition she describes a way of working and creating that extends across and out of the frame. This suggests that she is talking about the sort of ambience and interactivity that includes all sorts of phenomena. The whole framework and layering of place and time, feelings, relationships, history and context feed into and colour both making and experiencing art. Sleigh evidences a practice which uses this matrix of interconnections and encounters through her intimate meetings with her subjects and models and a form of co-poïesis or creative co-making, which involves both artist and model in collaboration.

Her models meet her from out of the frame of the painting and interact and resonate with her both during the process of creation and afterwards when they are fully established as an image. There is an afterimage of her love and affectionate enjoyment overlaying and colouring the images she

creates. Sleigh does this on many occasions through the expressions and postures of the people in the frame; her use of garden motifs with beautiful people relaxing and playing adult games, stylish interiors, settings, the careful placement of her own figure or face in the narrative and the coded visual allusions she inserts into the painting. McCarthy suggests this promotes “tactile, visual, emotional feelings” (1998, p. 154). This also provides a sense of the symbolic use of the matrix through the ideas of nurturing, generation of sustaining threads and interactions, growth, working alongside the other to create new linkages and transgress borders.

In the next chapter I will consider how Joan Semmel, Wendy Sharpe and Cecily Brown focus on their interactions with the male figure, whilst simultaneously occupying a prominent position within the frame. This creates a means to obviate accusations of sexual objectification by sharing the pictorial plane as well as establishing the scene for co-poïesis where their subjects are co-creators.



## CHAPTER 3: CO-POÏESIS AND COUPLING

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the focus is on another aspect of Ettinger's concept of the matrixial gaze- namely that of co-poeisis. Works in which the female artist is included within the frame with the male nude as co-participant rather than artist are discussed since these are seen to best exemplify a fully reciprocal interchange between protagonists on equal terms.

Joan Semmel, Wendy Sharpe and Cecily Brown evidence such strategies and all three produce imagery that broadly allows for multiple viewing stances and opportunities for positional variations and exchanges between viewed and viewer. The multiple axes between artist, model and the audience can be used to set up a metamorphic exchange where co-making might take place and where each of the entities within an encounter are able to add to the artwork in some way through actual participation in the creative act or through the subsequent readings.

### CO-POÏESIS

Co-poïesis is the aesthetic and ethical creative potentiality of borderlinking and of metamorphic weaving (Ettinger. 2005, p. 705)

The root of poïesis comes from Classical Greek terminology that focuses on making, creation, generation and emergence; Heffner says that poïesis means "the disposition, ordering, arranging of materials into meaningful

design” (1966, p. 394) which sounds somewhat prosaic as poetry also derives from this concept. Kitto underpins this by when he says that:

poïesis is the arrangement of the material; and by that is meant not simply giving a more or less elegant shape to something which in either case remains virtually the same thing, but that the arrangement is itself in the hands of a good poet, a way of saying what he means, a ground plan, as it were, which underlies and articulates the whole significance of the work (1966, p. 148).

Broadly it is a creative making with some emphasis on blossoming and emergence. Ettinger extends the meaning of poïesis to define the co-operative creativity experienced between multiple creators through the process of “co-poïesis”. She is building on ideas of creative co-emergence, making and ripening within a shared encounter. This means that the people involve are all part of the, sometimes risky, creative process, through opening up into it and allowing entrée to others or the work itself. Ettinger says that:

a matrixial co-emergence has healing power, but because of the transgression of individual boundaries that it initiates and entails and because of the self-relinquishment and fragilization it calls forward, it is also potentially traumatizing (2005, p. 706).

Co-poïesis is part of the metramorphic exchange, the development of matrixial borderlinks and transformational generation of interwoven nets of co-creativity. It asks for an opening up between makers allowing for something that sets up the possibility of working alongside one another, with another or others. Yet, as Ettinger would encourage us to believe, this does not necessarily mean that any of those involved are subsumed by any

of the others. It is a situation where there is a resonating exchange of energies and an interweaving of creativity always within a “trans-subjective pulsative borderspace” (2005, p. 708).

Ettinger explains that:

Artworking is sensing a potential co-emergence and co-fading and bringing into being objects or events, processes or encounters that sustain these metramorphoses and further transmits their effect. Art evokes further instances of trans-subjectivity that embrace and produce new partial subjects and makes almost-impossible new borderlinking available, out of elements and links already partially available in bits. These are going to be transformed in ways that can't be thought of prior to artworking itself (2005, p. 710).

This indicates that the act of co-poïesis is one that sets up the conditions for new work, ideas and linkages within a hospitable environment and through joining together, relinquishing some level of autonomy and allowing for trans-subjectivity the makers can create something, perhaps, unexpected. Co-poïesis allows for the creation of relations between subjects which sets up partial subjectivity or co-subjectivity between them.

Thematically ideas of joining, partial-subjectivity, weaving together aesthetic nets and threads through a shared practice come to mind. The artists analysed in this chapter demonstrate this partial subjectivity as they often include depictions of themselves within the frame involved in erotic love play, which allows for that shared practice to occur as co-creators.

Joan Semmel was working around the same time that Sylvia Sleigh was painting and as a result they have social context in common. This can be seen in terms of how, similarly to Sleigh, Semmel deliberately sets out to paint images of the nude figure which do not support objectification of the body. However, where one of Sleigh's key themes is the single male figure or odalisque, Semmel, incorporates the female figure within the scene in order to subvert the voyeuristic gaze of the male viewer and to propose an alternative erotic vision. She suggests that women "didn't have a language of eroticism [at that time, during the 1970s] and it was a new field, women didn't do this" (sic) in other words they did not have means to express painterly eroticism (Semmel, 2011). J. Key underpins this by saying that:

Painting seems to be inextricably linked with the 'voyeurism of the male gaze' and gestures of the male body, and is consequently theorised as an impossible space for the purpose of the female voyeur (1995, p. 154).

During the 1970s in particular, Semmel predominantly seeks to recover the production of images of the female body from "male manipulation and exploitation" whilst commenting on the nature of the burgeoning industry of pornography in America at that time (McCarthy, 1998, p. 183).

Over a relatively short period during the decade from 1970 Semmel used imagery that included both male and female figures, either painting herself or a model as a participant in the action in order to articulate a form of female heterosexual visual erotica. "It's about sex - not pornography, an

art dialogue” (Semmel, 2011). She also further adds that eroticism carries with it value-laden concepts, in that eroticism is “a high class way of describing something that is stimulating, carrying with it other aspects to look for, namely an aesthetic hook” (Semmel, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/62872890>). Using the words “dialogue” and “hook” establishes a background that encourages attempts at communication in some form, either as an engaged conversation between the participants or through the deliberate snagging of another and linking with them- almost catching them. Semmel’s focus of visual erotica also suggests that she is deliberately attempting to draw the viewer into the painting to become a co-conspirator or in essence a co-maker. She is offering an invitation to others to enjoy the eroticism of the works.



Figure 19: Joan Semmel, *Erotic Yellow*, 1973, oil on canvas, 188.8 x 188.8 cm, image source Alexander Gary Associates NY, Gallery site

*Erotic Yellow*, 1973 (Figure 19) as one of a series of sexually explicit paintings produced by Semmel, proposes a view of erotica which does not depend on or work to a masculine spectator, especially when considering pornographic images made for and by men. The abstracted nature of the work, its flatness and mysterious colouration creates a strange allure. The subject matter is both sexual and erotic, the latter suggesting a level of

engagement between the participants. Where pornography has traditionally concentrated on a passive female figure, this work places both the female and male body in a prominent position, where the woman is actively caressing the man.

Her pale, strong hand acts as an intense focal point, enhanced by the way the man's legs are splayed and extended outside the frame, and drawing the eye back to it as the stable central structural element of the picture. By concentrating on the negative space, highlighted by the pulsing purple-yellow interaction around the two figures, the artist has abstracted them so that they become almost depersonalized. The unnatural colouration also encourages a sense of un-worldliness, emotion and mystery to what could be a fairly banal sexual encounter. This colouration both changes the capacity of the viewer to associate the image with ordinary, in whatever form that takes, physiognomy and also enhances the emotional content of the work, suggesting layers of vibrating sensations and feelings. The woman's hand, due to its centrality, is perhaps a key to much of the power of the work. She tenderly cups his scrotum, strokes the perineum and the eye continually returns to this point. This caress also suggests touch and consequently even through its stillness there is an implication of tactility, sensuality, touching and being touched. The painting constantly refers to senses and phenomena outside of vision, touch being pre-eminent.

There is no sense of frantic coupling or gymnastic sex, more of the quality of a still life, capturing a few moments suspended in time. The woman is quietly active whilst the man could be seen to be passive, although Bordo



suggests that passivity is a misleading term, as in order to accept the gaze or touch of another one must be receptive (1999, p. 190). Consequently the male figure expresses a form of massive latent energy as he waits for the prolonged caress. Neither figure loses any strength or value in the exchange. Both figures are floating in time and space, totally immersed in one another, and emerging outside the frame towards the viewer. This is enhanced by using a square format and also spreading the figures across the painting, which might reference and link metramorphically and historically with Matisse's *La Danse*, (1909-10) (Figure 20). Semmel moves them outside the confines of the frame, past the borders of the stretcher. This offers something to the spectator, so that they are effectively incorporated into the action and can participate, at least notionally, should they wish.



Figure 20: Henri Matisse, *La Danse* (second version), 1909-10, oil on canvas 260 x 391cm, The Hermitage Museum, image source their site.



Such engagement of the spectator's imagination suddenly moves them from the comfort of being a gazer to, perhaps unwillingly, an actor. McCarthy suggests that it is almost impossible to objectify these figures (1995, p. 169). This is evidenced by the manner in which Semmel removes the heads of her lovers. Rather than being depersonalizing this opens up the potential, for a viewer, to position themselves within the frame in either the male or female role or even both simultaneously.

This supports Bracha Ettinger's (2006, 2009) concept of a fluid shared borderspace, which allows for engagement and exchange of energy within human relationships, whilst simultaneously moving within and outside the visual borders of the painted framework. As Pollock says:

[the] Matrix is an unconscious space of simultaneous emergence and fading of the I and the unknown non-I which is neither fused nor rejected. Matrix is based on feminine/prenatal interrelations and exhibits a shared borderspace (Pollock, 1996, p. 267).

Semmel produces such an energetic exchange both between the figures in the painting and also between the viewer and figures being depicted. In doing so she changes the dynamic between viewer and art object so that rather than see any of the bodies in an objectified fashion the audience is incorporated into the action. They are involved in the act of co-poïesis.

There are several layers here that work within a transformative exchange and extend towards co-poïesis. Semmel is making a strong feminist statement associated with agency and autonomy, regaining power or control over her own body and life, as well as allowing her to express

heterosexual erotic love. She is using colour and abstraction to create new visions of the body which assists to set up threads of emotional expression in the work. The viewer is drawn into the painting through a range of practical strategies including the subject, size, format, colour and abstracted extended lines outside the frame. By bringing the viewer into the frame they are carried into the process of co-making and being involved in the encounter, bringing their own threads of desire or ideas into the performance of the work. Finally there are interwoven threads and chords of erotic desire and sexuality being created by the participants, within a space of compassionate hospitality, where the two figures- and the audience- are floating in an imaginary fluid world. Ettinger proposes that this open-ended welcoming element is integral to the development of a co-poietic encounter. She says:

Therefore to become artistic or generate healing, the aesthetical transgression of individual borderlines (that occurs in any case with or without our awareness or intention) calls for the awakening of a specific ethical attention and erotic extension = an artistic generosity (Ettinger, 2005, p. 706)

Semmel is also working within an aesthetic practice which intends to sustain an ethical attention, one which disallows the objectification of the body whilst still inviting an erotic encounter.

Key to this is that the bodies in this space are working together as partial shared subjects and they exemplify welcomed transgressive, exchanges between the figures. An additional thread, a historical or methodological string, is that often Semmel employed models making sexual play to create

the drawings later used as the basis of the paintings (Meyer. 2007). These models are involved in this process as fully as Semmel and in turn bring new linkages into the work.

Similarly, *Indian Erotic* (1972) (Figure 21) uses strategies consistent with *Erotic Yellow* working to destabilize the viewer and reduce the distance between the canvas, the action and the spectator. Again the formal structure, colouration and scale echoes other works around this time where each figure is relatively equally depicted and both have strongly abstract qualities. However, in this instance the male figure seems to be placed in a rather heavy position, slumped over the female body in a nearly inert fashion. Conversely the female figure is activated by her strongly flexed feet, legs, arms and hands. She almost wraps him up within her embrace and bears some resemblance to Hindu tantric sculptures, (Figure 22), which are also quite energetic and often depict willing mutually embracing figures involved in erotic love making. This suggests that the woman is the active partner in this moment and also questions the usual paradigm of active male and passive female. By doing this Semmel allows for fluid arrangements between participants, suggesting a concept of a “self-body” [her term] (Semmel in conversation with Meyer, 2007) which provides an opening for women to recognize, articulate and visualize their own sexual needs in such a context. Semmel is asking other people, other women, to participate in the process of making through this imagining their own sexual and erotic desire. We, as viewers, are placed into an involved and connected framework of encounters. The interweaving of the bodies caught

in a moment of transformation and a pause within the action and our interaction with the work opens up and invites creative meetings between all of the partial subjects.



Figure 21: Joan Semmel, *Indian Erotic*, 1972, oil on canvas, 137.2 x 188.88 cm, image source [Joan Semmel website](#)

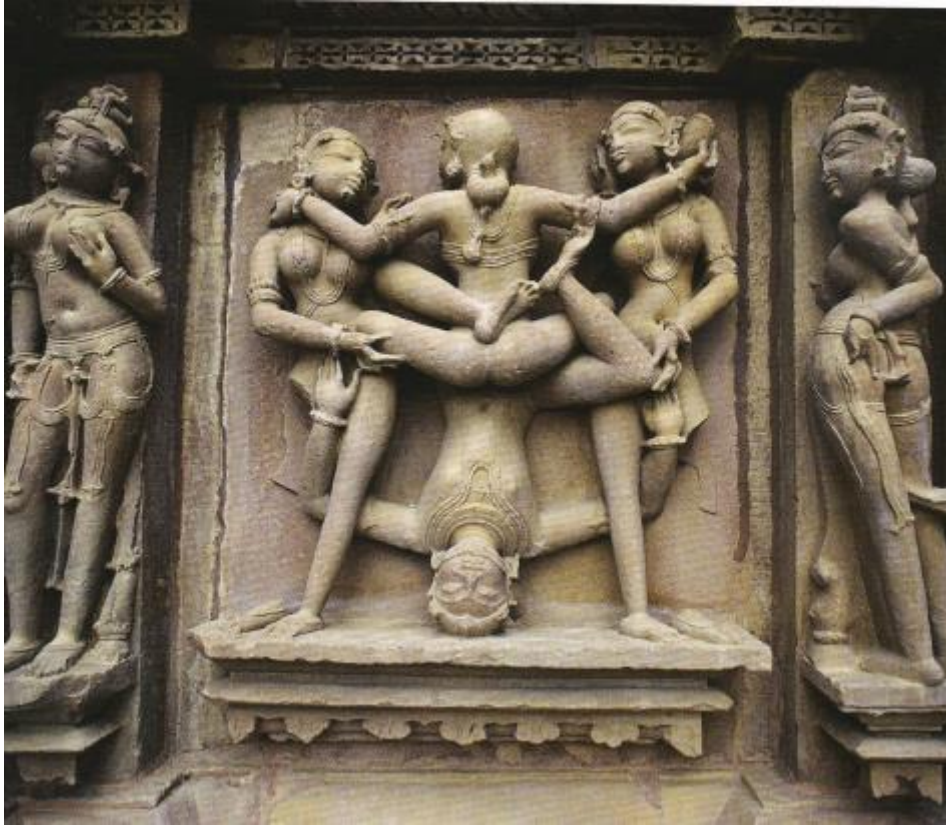


Figure 22 Artist Unknown, Mithunas, sculpture from a temple at Khajuraho, 10-11th Century AD, image credit Dimodia/Bridgeman Images in *Body of Art*, Phaidon, 2015

*Red White and Blue*, (1973) (Figure 23) and *Touch* (1977) (Figure 25) all follow the same threads as *Erotic Yellow* and *Indian Erotic*, the latter paintings particularly and deliberately being used to express tactility and sensuality. This elaborates on Semmel's belief that female sexuality involves an immersive aesthetic experience which allows for engagement of the body in a fully sexual manner. She does not avoid depictions of penetrative sex, something which she says "feminists do not approve of or believe in" (Semmel, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/62872890> ) and as a consequence she bravely faces potential detractors and ensures that the argument about the nature of female sexuality is as open as possible.

*Red, White and Blue*, continues the theme of abstracted figures, in flagrante, floating in a colour field.



Figure 23: Joan Semmel, *Red White and Blue*, 1973, oil on canvas 121.92 x 147.32 cm, image source Joan Semmel website





Figure 24 Joan Semmel, *Untitled*, 1971, Alexander Gray Associates, NY

The couple almost fly out of the frame so that they recede from our gaze. The velvety crimson background pushes against the blue of the female figure, who in turn envelops the pale man in her legs. There is something quite unexpected in this colour relationship giving the painting a sense of being reversed or inverted. The bluish skin of the woman against the rich red seems to suggest a nocturnal scene, a body lit by moonlight or submarine pallor. Where *Erotic Yellow* and *Indian Erotic* are highly coloured and exuberant *Red White and Blue* is subdued. However, it is full of forward movement, a trajectory outside the frame and beyond the borders of the canvas, which causes the viewer to be dragged along with them.

Because of the manner in which this work is cropped the spectator is pulled into the vortex of action, the vertiginous down-a-rabbit-hole sense of the unknown. The figures form a strong diagonal which pulls the eye



through and across the full spread of the stretcher, causing an active, linear play and supporting this toppling effect. Semmel is immersing her lovers in this fall, and we as spectators are shown that such dizzying momentum can disorient and destabilize the gaze. If this painting is compared to Semmel's very early iterations of sexually explicit expressionist paintings (see Figure 24) it seems that by making the image more crisp and deliberately revealing she opens up the sexual act to being seen in an unveiled state. *Untitled* (1971), is quick and loosely articulated and as such is full of movement, implied lines and a sense that it is all about emotion and energetic sexual abandon. The later painting being more tightly formed still has a deeply emotional current, the movement into a vortex, but is much formal and structurally defined.

The process of metamorphosis and generation of new borderlinks occur through the making of the original drawing which blossoms into the painting, creating something new that still references the original art work whilst generating a whole new aspect of the work. The vertiginous structure that seems to cause the flying away, toppling effect, produces links to a new encounter, one available to the maker, the lovers or to the viewer through the imagination.



Figure 25: Joan Semmel, *Touch*, 1977, oil on canvas, 137.16 x 269.24 cm, Alexander Gray Associates, [gallery website](#)

*Touch* (1977) (Figure 25) moves away from the colour-filled semi-abstracted format of the earlier works, towards naturalistic tones and clearly articulated human somatic form. This seems to signify a change of focus and acts as a precursor to the paintings Semmel delivers after this period, ones without the male body, essentially focusing on her own, slowly aging self over an extended period of time. This might have been brought on by her emerging awareness that the only body she could definitively paint and legitimately explore is her own. <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Her later work focuses on the ageing body, especially her own and reflect on the changes over time to her body.

Her body, she insisted, was the only one she would or could paint. If she was going to subject a body to her gaze and to that of her audience, then at least it would be her body and no one else's (McCarthy 1998, p. 183)`.

Martin Jay suggests that:

Instead of seeking a firm ground, a philosophy built on visible formations, women swarm in the moving sea, the fluid medium that both frighten[s] and attract[s] (1993, p. 526).

Semmel depicts such swarmings in polymorphous sensations and *Touch* stresses these feelings by predominantly revealing her interest in tactility. Although sight provides the means to enter into the works it is through the suggestion of immersive, tactile feelings that the viewer is engaged. *Touch*, by its nomenclature makes it quite obvious what she wants to express, and the natural colouration of the figures brings the painting into a real world of human interaction. This possibly suggests that it is her real body that she is looking at as opposed to a fantasy body<sup>15</sup>. The male figure is still treated in much the same way as the female whilst the focal interest is mainly on the woman's figure. McCarthy says that Semmel is recapturing the female body from the male gaze and in this work it seems that the male body has become an integral element of her artifice (1998). He is an aspect of her sexual fantasy but it is her feelings and her erotic expressions that are paramount. This is possibly also expressed by the fact that in order to imagine a head on either of the bodies, it is easier to do so from the female position as the male is askew and marginalized at the edge of the frame. By doing this she also allowing the viewer to take the position of either body,

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<sup>15</sup>She started to produce these paintings after looking at her own body and deciding that it was a new and worthwhile format to explore.

effectively setting them up to be able to take multiple positions within or without the frame, and this becomes an act of co-poïesis where the viewer is an essential element in or with the work. The viewer is witnessing the encounter as well as being within it.

In her own idiom Wendy Sharpe also suggests the senses, shared spaces and rooms lovers frequent, sensuality and the overlaying emotional patina which colours both erotic and metamorphic border-linked experiences. She also evidences, in particular, a strong thread of co-poïesis in her work where the artist and model both play together and work in concert to create it.

### Wendy Sharpe Self and Other (1990-1995)

John McDonald (2011, unpaginated website) says of Wendy Sharpe's practice that:

It's tempting to see these works as icons of a new feminist assertiveness, which does not complain about longstanding injustices but takes an active stand. *Diana of Erskinvill*<sup>16</sup> need not feel cowed nor beholden to any man. She is not the passive object of the male gaze, but a woman who takes pleasure [in] her own sensual and physical nature.

This proposes that, in a similar fashion to Joan Semmel, Sharpe is both reclaiming the female body and working with the male body in terms of a shared interactive encounter within the work. Some of Sharpe's paintings will be used to analyse her resolution of the relationship of the artist and

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<sup>16</sup> This painting is of a single female figure in her studio, she looks directly at the viewer and challenges them to make any sort of commentary about her state or situation.

model/muse, as well as touch on her use of humour and play in her paintings. In addition this will assist to establish how there is recognizable and particular evidence of the use of the process of co-poïesis in her paintings.

Where Sylvia Sleigh depicts her muse in a dignified fashion using a stylized, meticulous methodology, and Joan Semmel produces hyper-real larger than life canvases, Wendy Sharpe's work is full of vigorous expressionist colouration and emotional drama. Events, ideas and themes are magnified and writ large so that her inner life is revealed as a dramatic piece of mythical theatre. Similarly to Semmel, Sharpe is the scene. She is absolutely central to the action while the male figure, her muse perhaps, is a supporting and co-operative player. As Kidd notes:

It's a story that unfolds with Sharpe employing various guises of the muse and allegorical figures to orchestrate different models of portraiture and the figure (2011, p. 9).

As a consequence of the focus being not so much on the muse but on the self, the male figure becomes part of the broader scenery. McDonald suggests that Sharpe is her own muse and narcissistic; however, as will be argued here this focus on herself is a means to counteract the dominance of the male gaze by asserting the power of her own sexuality. Thus, some of the male figures, in these early works, are fellow actors, players within her inner life, and embodied elements of her own desires (Negrin, 2014, conversation). Each role, revelation and experiment is about her and the encounters she has with her models, although, importantly, she does not

place the male figure into situations which might degrade them. If that were to be the case she would be equally degraded.

These figures are also being employed as structural painterly elements holding up the main figure by acting as signifiers of events, dreams and extended realities. Sharpe avoids objectification by becoming a participant in the scene rather than a spectator. In contrast, male sexual fantasies typically depict their object of desire without including themselves in the scene; as this leaves the fantasy open for the spectator to be the one who places himself into the picture (Mulvey, 1989).

This is exemplified in *Artist with Men and Cake* (1990) (Figure 26) where the artist, playfully, has her cake and eats it too. At the core of this early work she is establishing a claim to a particular position as artist, biographer and fantasist. She plays with and reverses the notion of the randy artist in his studio with his model. By picturing herself as an erotic being, gladly basking in the attentions of two men, she is simultaneously, joyfully, reclaiming the female body and depicting the male as an accomplice and player in her own theatre. She is enjoying the men without degrading them. The thick lustrous paint, baroque curlicues and swirls, and the expressive forms build up a strong presence and using paler colour on the woman ensures that she is the focal point, which spreads fully across the canvas. Her arm curls and hooks the head of one of her suitors, pulling him towards and into her.



Figure 26: Wendy Sharpe, *Artist with Men and Cake*, 1990, oil on canvas, 136 x 122 cm, private collection, image source `Bradfield et al. in Kidd, (2011), Wendy Sharpe.

A leg stretches across the frame so that she is extended strongly along the diagonal, activating the central field. The artist dominates the whole painting, showing her at home in her studio, her temple. The men hold her up, fondle a breast, kiss her daintily and are her playmates. She offers herself to them and the viewer, as well as seeming to be relatively oblivious as to who is looking. It is a willing offering, carelessly erotic, depicting a woman happy in her skin. Conversely, the men are quite tender with her, a meek kiss on the cheek, one holds out the gift of a rosy nipple cake to the frisky goddess. The underlying theme of play filled eroticism is part of the



tactile jouissance and pleasure that Irigaray discusses as being a particularly womanly trait (2011. pp. 130-140). The pinks and reds of her nipples serve as strong focal points, repeated and stressed in the cup cake.

All of the figures are fully operating within this encounter; they play together and create the scene. The use of thick, red, interwoven strong linear elements, on the left of the painting, curl and thread in and out of the frame and the broad grey loops and strokes of paint in the upper right, serve to link the figures together. It's a back stage moment, where the trio are focused on making erotic play. Yet within this moment each figure is discrete, they are "differentiating within jointness" (Ettinger, 2005, p. 707) where time is prolonged and they transgress personal boundaries.

Both *Circe Painting on Men* (1991) (Figure 27) and *Fantasy* (1992) (Figure 28), follow similarly erotic themes. The former evidences how the artist drives the whole painting, revelling in her strength, sense of identity and sexual power. Circe, in myth and painting, is usually depicted (by male artists) as a wicked sorceress, enslaving men and turning them into beasts, the epitome of castration anxiety. This Circe gazes straight out of the canvas at the viewer. Her look is strong, powerful, audacious, brazen and sexually provocative. There is nothing passive or permitting objectification in this viewpoint, she has turned the gaze around and effectively repels any chance of it weakening the figure.

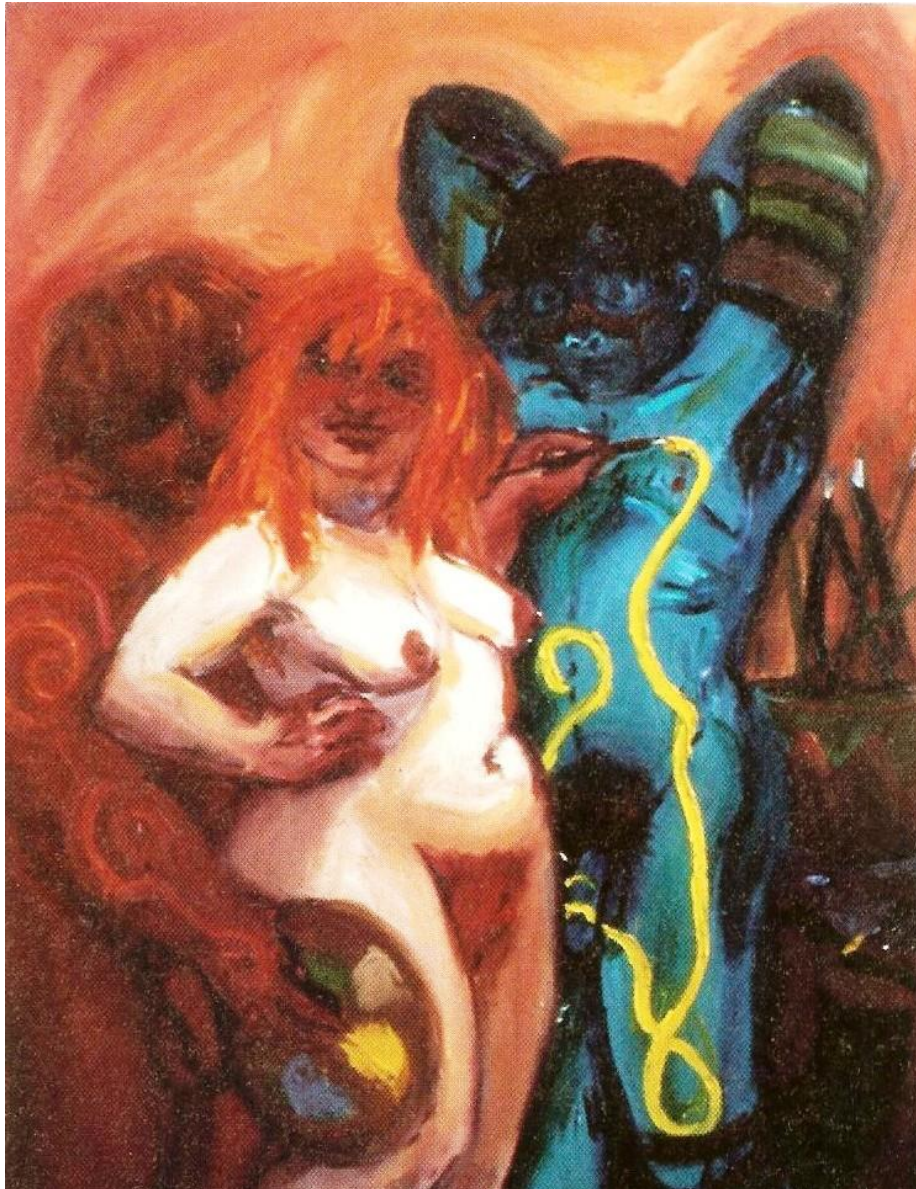


Figure 27: Wendy Sharpe, *Circe Painting on Men*, 1991, oil on canvas 182 x 166 cm, private collection, image source Bradfield et al. in Kidd, (2011), Wendy Sharpe

The male figures are not objectified either, although they are depicted as being in her power. This is exemplified where there is a certain amount of ambiguity as to who is writing on whom, as the hand that flourishes the paintbrush could be the sienna coloured man behind Circe, and he also carries the palette. Her subjects are willing playmates as she idly doodles on the blue man, leaving tracks of where she has been and where she has toyed with him. He is allowing her to do this, body opened and receptive,

belly thrust forward to permit her calligraphy. They work together and he places himself in a risky situation by being opened up to the view of the audience and the playful attentions of Circe. The woman is orchestrating events, writing, drawing, inscribing on her willing fellows and demonstrating her ownership. The men in turn seem happy enough to be enthralled by her, they are co-conspirators. This harks back to the original Circe. When given the chance to return to human shape some of her beasts stayed that way, preferring to be animals than return to a duplicitous and ignoble human form.

The figure on the left of the painting is in the process of fading and retreating and the figure on the right is emerging into prominence. They vacillate and blossom, co-emerge and co-fade (Ettinger, 2005, p. 711). Essentially, they are enacting the playful prolonged encounter which might set up the conditions for co-poïesis, even when the men risk their autonomy, which according to Ettinger can occur as each person relinquishes some element of the self (2005, p. 706). This causes a certain amount of movement between the actors as they exchange energies and waver into prominence.

This painting can be read as both a commentary on the gaze and as a means of showing the male figure in an eroticized manner without it necessarily being degraded. The female figure is challenging the usual position of gazer and gazed at, by reversing the look out of the painting and engaging with the spectator. Usually the gazer is the spectator not the subject. The fact that all of the figures are naked establishes the possibility

that if one body is objectified they all are. Equally, as the woman is such a powerful figure and she has willingly revealed herself, it is very hard to view her as in an inferior position. This resonates with Semmel who also shares the space with the male figure and reveals her, or the model's, nakedness. In addition this also highlights how the figures are deeply interconnected and involved with one another, revealing the metamorphic exchanges as described by Ettinger (2005, p. 703–712).

*Fantasy* (1992) (Figure 28) takes this theme further by repeating the ménage à trois imagery. Once again Sharpe is playing with eroticism, her sexuality and reversing the fantasy of the male artist in his studio with nubile women. The male figures join with and encompass the pale female figure who is brimming with her own power, which is enhanced by the hot colouration, brushwork and sweeping gestures, all of which suggest pleasure in both the act of painting and the content of the work. She is basking in the erotic sensation of being caressed and adored by two men, her face suffused with an almost irradiated glow of infrared heat. Her nipples are brightly enlarged and reinforce the sense of sumptuous, luscious hedonism.



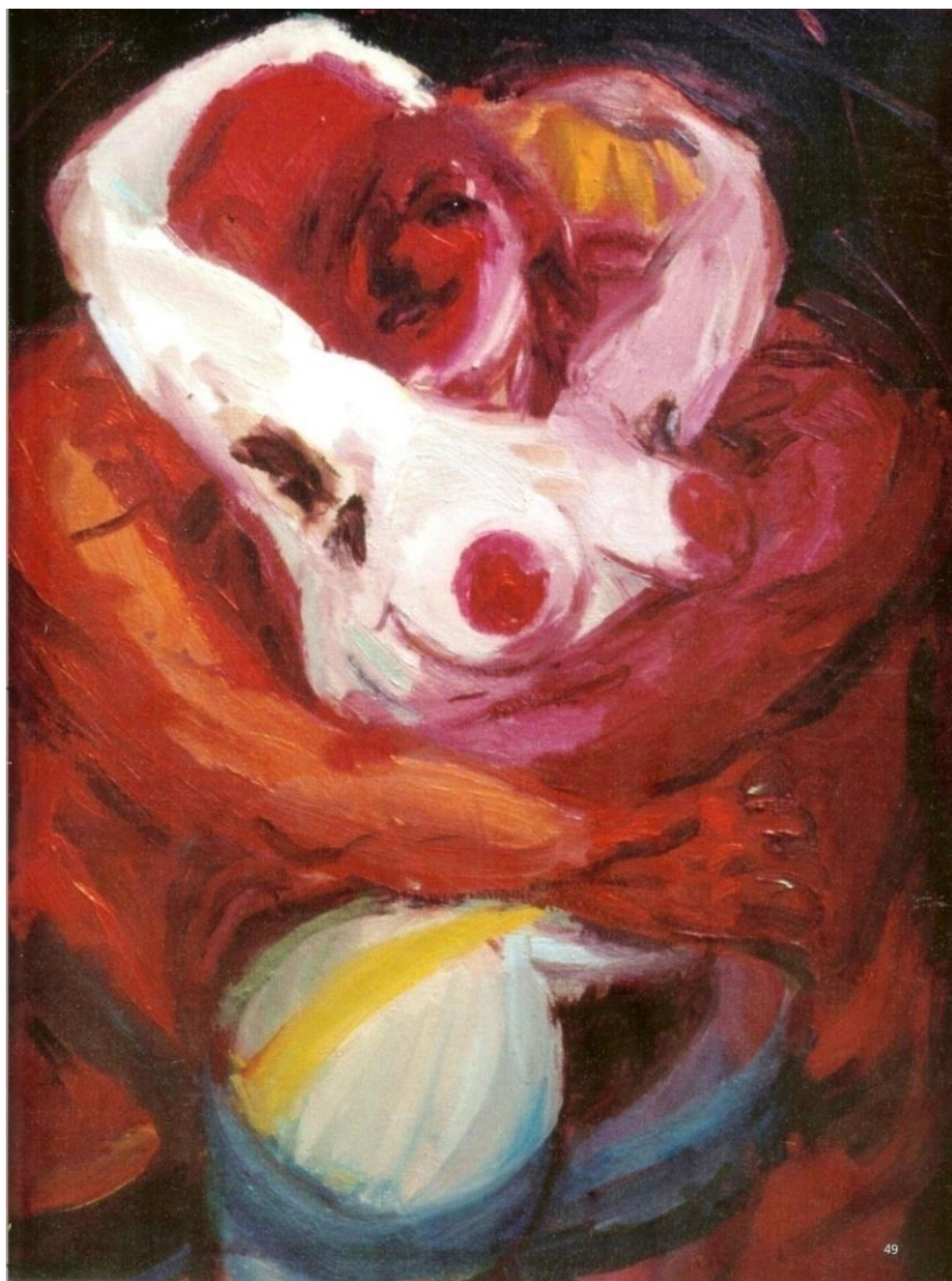


Figure 28: Wendy Sharpe, *Fantasy*, 1992, oil on canvas, 85 x 70 cm, private collection, image source Bradfield et al. in Kidd, (2011), Wendy Sharpe.

In common with other works, previously mentioned, Sharpe is a central focus to the painting. It is about her feelings and how she is immersed in the sensuality of the moment. The men are richly sketched, literally holding her in a passionate swirl of colour and innuendo. They are fading whilst she emerges. At other moments they could emerge and she might

fade. The quick broad strokes of paint strongly suggest the figures without going into too much detail, yet the male figures are important elements to the picture as without them there is no playful trans-subjective interlude.

In *Fantasy, Circe, and Men with Cake* the men are a willing tabula rasa for her to write upon or to play with. However, by including herself so prominently and openly in the scene she is essentially part of it but, importantly, without the men she would lose some of her impact and rationale. They are intrinsic to the painting and perform an important role as co-operative creators. They might be recognizable models or be based on her lovers or are perhaps an amalgam of male sexual energies or allegorical symbols for her formed out of a combination of the real and memory or imagination. They are energizing forces that work with the artist to create the scene together.

The loose brushwork working towards the edge of the picture also suggests extensions outside the frame, and the riotous, but comfortable atmosphere, provides a sense of generous mutual play. Each of the players are engrossed in the moment, involved in a prolonged encounter full of the compassionate hospitality that Ettinger has suggested is required to set up the conditions for co-poïesis.

We are being given entrée to Sharpe's inner thoughts, her studio, her fantasies, inner reality, but why? She is allowing us to see her in her most intimately revealed moments, full of the energy and vigour of a young virile painter. It seems that she wants the viewer to experience her power, to see

how she can paint independent of any masculine construction. This is reinforced by *Hercules and Omphale* (1994) (Figure 29).



Figure 29: Wendy Sharpe, *Hercules and Omphale*, 1994, oil on canvas, 152 x 137 cm, private collection, image source Bradfield et al. in Kidd, (2011), Wendy Sharpe.

As punishment for the murder of a friend Hercules was sold into slavery to Queen Omphale.<sup>17</sup> In Sharpe's version of the myth Omphale is depicted as a gloriously slovenly strumpet amid the detritus of a party or perhaps

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<sup>17</sup>The Lydian queen Omphale owned Hercules, as a slave. She bought the hero from the god Hermes, who sold him following an oracle which declared that Hercules must be sold into slavery for three years  
<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Herakles/omphale.html> 30Jan2014



merely an ill kept room. Hercules, tongue stuck out in concentration, sews a cloth at her feet. Omphale, Sharpe perhaps, is languidly, sensually arrayed across the canvas, dominating the whole central plane. Her high key bright skin contrasts with the shady background, provocatively pushed forward, pudenda first. A red slash of colour on the vulva reinforces the prominence of her mound of Venus, implying that she is sexually aroused. Details such as Omphale's pink scuffed knees and Hercules bright pink ears have rather bawdy and salacious undertones.

The male figure is encompassed by the woman, visually, formally and metaphorically. Omphale is sometimes portrayed as an image of castration anxiety and in this work she is enthusiastically depicted as such a figure. The red stroke of her vulva is suggestive of the concept of a vagina dentata, a toothed and hence dangerous mouth. However, in recognition of his malfeasance Hercules has accepted his punishment and has placed himself within her thrall, performing women's work and probably being Omphale's lover. As a warrior he could easily leave this role but chooses to stay and honourably accept the crime and the just punishment. He is willing to sacrifice some of his masculinity to fulfil his obligation.

Yet even with this allegorical narrative as the main theme of the work, Sharpe has treated it with playful, irreverent humour. Hercules has been feminized to an extent, naked except for a pair of flowery slippers and meekly engrossed in his sewing<sup>18</sup>. Conversely, Omphale exudes

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<sup>18</sup> This strategy is also employed by Sylvia Sleigh who often places men in "feminine situations" (Sleigh, 2010)

uncontrollable natural forces much like the ancient Greek Medusa represents the female genitals and the wildness of womanly sexuality. Sharpe stresses such attributes and deliberately pushes the theme as fully as possible. She is exploring the, often cited, theme of woman's association with nature and depicts it as a strength rather than a fault. It is interesting to see that Omphale has her breasts covered and her vulva revealed, suggesting that she is using her sex as a shield to repel the gaze, or potentially as a challenge the viewer.

Within this exchange there are new things being created. Sharpe has taken something from the myth of Omphale and Hercules and transformed it into something new, where Hercules does not appear to be fighting against this meeting but submits to it, allowing Omphale to create exchanges with him. He is relinquishing some of his autonomy and working with her, whilst she builds a web of joyful nurturance for them.

#### WENDY SHARPE: LATER WORKS (1995-2011)

During this period there is more of a focus on examination of her relationship with her male partner rather than a portrayal of her sexual imaginings. A series of small sketchy works; *Couple in Bedroom*, *Couple Kissing in Bedroom*, *Hotel Room Black Socks and Red Nail Polish* (1997) (Figure 30) follow up on this theme of depicting couples in loving and mundane situations, although they still concern sexual love and play.

These works are small, intimate and shadowy. In Kidd's book on Sharpe they are grouped together in a set, forming a linked narrative of an encounter between lovers in a room. The condensed, almost collapsed, format serves to include the viewer within the frame not as a voyeur but as an obscured shady presence drawn into the space. The figures are blended or joined together and it is hard to focus on the specifics of the body. This causes the lovers to work formally and notionally within the frame exchanging co-poietic energy with one another. The relatively small size of these pictures also provides a sense of intimacy and hidden pleasures within the dimly lit interiors of a bedroom or hotel room. It is a safe, warm and hospitable space. All of the works link with one another and play off each other through the narrative of an encounter between the couple.



Figure 30: Wendy Sharpe, *Couple in Bedroom*, Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 cm, *Couple Kissing in Bedroom*, Oil on canvas, 30 x 30 cm ; *Red Nail Polish*, Oil on canvas, 20 x 25 cm; *Hotel Room Black Socks*, 1997 Oil on canvas, 20 x 25 cm, image source Bradfield et al. in Kidd,

This approach is sustained in *Dream* (2001) (Figure 31) which, although it has an element of fantasy and disclosure of an inner emotional reality also deals with the ordinary humanity of the figures.

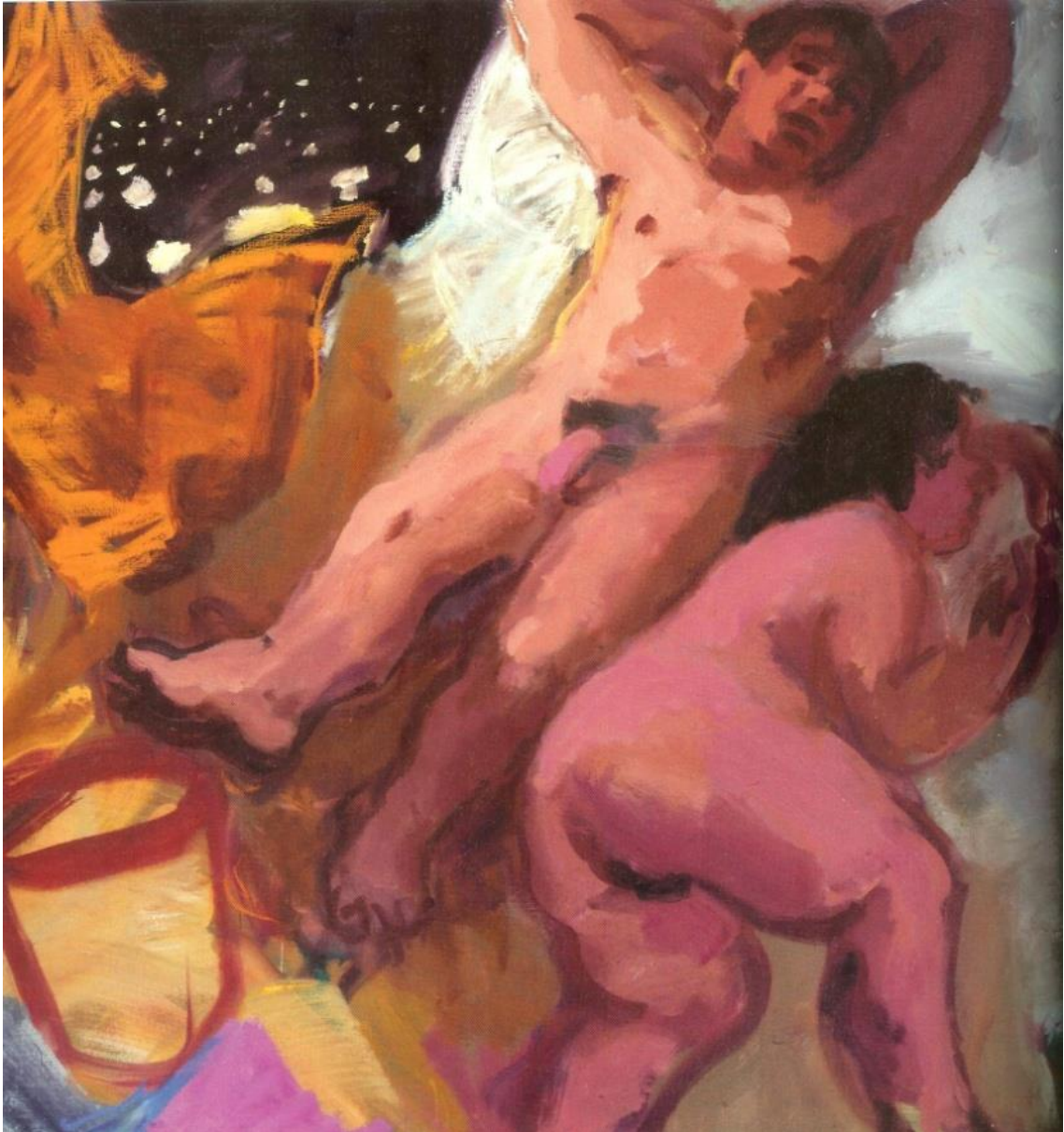


Figure 31: Wendy Sharpe, *Dream*, 2001, oil on canvas, 166 x 166 cm, private collection, image source Bradfield et al. in Kidd, (2011), Wendy Sharpe.

There is an elision of dream state and the real, where the borders of reality are transgressed and transformed. Sharpe, the female figure is a mortal woman and her male counterpart is just a man. They are lifted up onto the

same plane, dreaming together, sharing and co-emerging within the encounter and they are placed quite equally in the frame. The ruddy pink colouration of both figures is similar so that neither is pre-eminent. It is a sharing of space and view. Effectively the male and female figures are seen in the same way, have a similar role in the visual play. This capacity to share the situation evidences Sharpe's capacity to withstand or accept the gaze, in partnership with the male figure, so that neither is treated as an object of scrutiny or both are. This also describes the use of a matrixial gaze, one which uses fluid interactions and generates energetic exchanges between the figures. The pair exists within a zone of compassionate hospitality where they transgress boundaries, outside of time in a sense and are totally engrossed in the moment.

Ettinger suggests that within such encounters there is "differentiating in jointness" (2005, p. 707) that recognizes the immersion and creation of shared borderlinks, partial subjectivity yet still enables the actors to sustain something of themselves. They co-emerge and co-fade simultaneously sharing and making something between them and external to them.

Both the centrality of Sharpe as the nexus of the painting and the figurative element of artist and model being depicted together in the frame are consistent themes throughout Sharpe's work. The early works demonstrate a wide range of strong characteristics, an exuberant joie de vivre, playfulness, eroticism and virtuoso showiness that suggests an artist at her most daring and energetic. These paintings are those of a young energetic



artist full of vigour and strength, not so much virile than a virago in the sense of being strong and warrior-like and expressing her sexual energies in strong terms and imagery. Dutton (2009, unpaginated transcript) suggests that the male artist uses a form of display, like a peacock, as a reproductive attention seeking strategy to attract females. This might be going too far with Sharpe but there is an element of performance in her painting. This is exemplified through the formal qualities of her painting. She is engaged with her material, and uses large flamboyant movements and strong painterly strokes, vivid colouration and often large scale format in her canvases. She makes a virtue of such features and fully owns her untrammelled approach.

A core element of Sharpe's early work is the use of self-portraiture to explore her inner reality and fantastical dream life, eroding the distance between reality and imagination, memory and life. This suggests, in common with Semmel, firstly the reclamation of her own body and by extension an exploration of her own psyche and then through the inclusion of the male figure she develops and extends both herself and the male figure. She is open to multiple encounters and arrangements. Importantly, the male body is an integral and important aspect of her work in that it provides a fellow conspirator and playmate in Sharpe's baroque theatre, to work alongside rather than against. Without the male figure the works would lose their strength and value and few new threads and networks would be formed, the boundaries that seem to be blurred and transgressed



in some of the works would not exist. Co-poïesis is occurring here through this integration of the efforts of all of the actors.

Practically when the male and female figures are evaluated it becomes fairly clear that both sexes are depicted in a relatively consistent manner. If anything the female figures are often more openly revealed than the male, especially when her breasts are covered and her sex is bare. As noted, the sex could be seen as a shield and a signifier of her sexuality. Effectively these works subvert the concept of a voyeuristic gaze not only by reversing the position of the subject, but by inclusion of the self in the frame which blocks or pre-empts suggestions of sexual objectification.

Sharpe uses humour and playfulness to soften the impact of her commentary. Sleigh is more low key in her approach, which is to be expected of a woman starting her work at the early juncture of feminist art, but she too uses play and humour to press her point. Sharpe is a child of her time and much more lively and bawdy in her practice. She uses audacious and playful scenes in many of her works; Hercules' flowery slippers and bumpkin hands as he sews a rosy cloth, the innocent and gormless expression on Circe's slaves, the chaotic studio, her own oversize persona depicted in droopy football socks and lurid underwear. Through the matrixial gaze we are able to see layers of infused myth and history, intermixed with questions about voyeurism and the role of the female painter couched in ornate and ludicrous confabulations and situations. All the while the artist peers out of the frame and watches the response, makes offerings and ensures that the spectator is invited to share the encounter.

## CECILY BROWN

In common with Sleigh, Semmel and Sharpe, Cecily Brown has created numerous works containing erotic and sexual imagery of couples.

However, whereas Semmel and Sharpe maintain literal renditions of the body, Brown pushes outside the boundaries of figuration towards the attenuated space between figurative and abstract form. She “leaves a way into the painting” (Brown, 2013) by suggesting implied ambiguous figures, yet still blurs the image by covering it up with layers of paint, smoothing, elision and erasure.

Thematically she aligns with Semmel and Sharpe with regards to such depictions, either as literal presences or through the implied absence of the other. Her use of abstraction tends to colour the eroticism with a veil which covers the site of sexuality yet still conveys sexual allure; suggesting that by partially covering and abstracting the body or the sex she enhances the level of eroticism, curiosity and interest. This partial veiling by Brown revitalizes and reignites the mystery of sexual conjunction as it requires both the need to look closely at the image and also engages the power of the imagination.

At one level, her paintings deliver strategies which comment on the gaze, in the sense of looking into a work to both translate visual content into recognizable form from the viewer’s perspective, and as a means to offer an

experience which allows one to become involved within the frame of the work. The looking requires active engagement with the image, perhaps because of the way in which figuration and abstraction cause a form of conflicted visual alternation in the eye but also due to the often ambiguous nature of her work where the viewer needs make an effort to perceive form. Somewhere between seeing the figure and responding to the abstract forms within and about it, the gaze is drawn in and thrown back out before it can truly take in information. Brown says that this causes some level of frustration and near anxiety or unease, but throughout she always leaves some residue of the figure to provide *entrée* or an anchor point (Zurn, 2012, video, unpaginated).

Through the use of blurring, erasure and re-inscription Brown's work can also be read in terms of employing co-poïesis to create new themes and work outside the frame. The figures share subjectivity and work together within the painting, are co-emergent and simultaneously fade away. These encounters, the dance between the figures, allow for a constant interweaving and positional changes and movement, enhanced by the use of broad strokes and loose blended forms. Brown sets up the bodies to morph into one another, join up, whilst maintaining a discrete embodiment. Ettinger speaks of togetherness, "differentiation-in-coemergence" (2005, p. 707) that is nonetheless particular. The individuals are co-emergent, yet through coupling create another form or being that is partly merged. She says:

While continuously inspiring one another, I and non-I create a singular shared trans-subjectivity where even traces of each one's earlier or exterior trans-subjective co-emergences, co-eventings and co-fading with other non-I(s) influence the newly emerging time space (Ettinger, 2005, p. 704).



Figure 32: Cecily Brown, *Performance*, 1999, oil on linen, 254 x 279 cm, image Rod McKeever, Studio International

This occurs in *Performance* (1999) (Figure 32) which similarly to Semmel's work employs a non- natural palette to depict lovers in a sexually explicit moment; where a figure possibly a woman, spider-like, hovers over a supine body in the upper or ascendant position whilst a blue, subaqueous nocturnal world slides around the lovers, suggesting the slippery elusive

quality of paint and alluding to the sensuality of their sexual play. The X shaped crux of the two bodies is dominated by the strongly delineated angular legs of the upper figure that takes on what appears to be the more active position whilst the supine other is placed in what would usually be considered a more passive position or role. It is difficult to see clearly the sex of each figure. Although it does not really “matter” initially, it seems that the upper figure is female, but the more one looks the less sure one can be. This demonstrates the metamorphic exchanges that might occur during the process of co-poïesis where the two bodies are conjoined and almost extrude into one another, producing links and transforming into something else.

The way in which the floor and background swell and slide also suggests a constantly mutating space transfigured and abstract, a wave of colour. The streaky background also brings to mind Frances Bacon’s *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, (Figure 33) provoking not so much the screaming anxiety of that painting but a similar painterly veiling combined with architectural structural elements which frame the action. The central figure moves and floats above their partner, yet both figures are resolved in much the same format. If the upper figure is read as a woman there might be some commentary here about roles and female sexuality. The curtaining combined with the position and linear strength of the woman also suggests a link to works such as Rembrandt’s *French Style Bed or Happy Position* (1640), (Figure 34) where the figure has his back to the spectator, partially hiding his lover.





Figure 33: Frances Bacon, *Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953



Figure 34: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The French Style Bed or Happy Position*, 1646, drypoint etching, 125 x 224 mm. in Neret, G. 2005, *Erotica Universalis*, Taschen, Cologne

Like Semmel and Sharpe, in the sense that they often portray the female protagonist in a central, active or sexually revealing role, Brown has opened up the female figure in order to share being revealed to the viewer's gaze.

*Performance* might also be read as a commentary on the nature of the sexual act, a performance, a piece of theatre.

The veiling and curtaining in the background coupled with the suggestion of structure, a stage maybe, promote the idea that this is an act, a play enacted internally by the lovers. While there are some theatrical elements to this work the viewer is not separated as an audience in a conventional

theatrical setting. We are drawn in through the way in which the foreground figure has been cropped and is moving beyond the frame and this also provides for aspects of the matrixial gaze where the viewer is an important element in the work. Almost incidentally the term performance might also allude to the act of painting. There is a strong sense of the artist's joy in manipulating the paint and in the way it slides across and interacts with the surface of a canvas. She talks of the "mysterious nature of painting, its elusive quality, morphing into something else" (Brown, in Zurn, 2012) and this emerges throughout her work. Cavallo substantiates this idea, suggesting that Brown's work is "about paint, about what paint can do- performance" (2013, video).

Rosemary Betterton identifies this pleasure in using paint and says that many contemporary women painters are working in complex painterly encounters as a means of engaging with the world, (2004. p. 2) and part of this exploration is associated with both spectatorship and embodiment. She admits that her own interest and need to write about painting is grounded in embodied sensual pleasure and says:

By evoking my sense of being a carnal subject, a female subject in a fleshy body, painting *can* begin to articulate the complex pleasures and displeasures attached to looking as (and being) a woman. And it is the material qualities of paint, its sensuousness and colour, its ambiguity and resistance, over and above the signified meanings of a specific painting that continue to haunt me (2004, pp. 4-5)



This visceral sensuality can be particularly seen in Brown's work *Trouble in Paradise* (1999) (Figure 35), where sexuality and eroticism between lovers are inscribed and revealed through erasure and revelation of the figures.



Figure 35: Cecily Brown, *Trouble in Paradise*, 1999, oil on canvas 190.8 x 229.2 cm. Tate

As discussed *Performance* still sustains figurative elements where the bodies of the couple are formally strong, in contrast, *Trouble in Paradise* obscures the bodies with layers and smears of paint. Emerging from a richly-textured froth of smeared material two main figures are revealed and partly obscured by coloured skeins. On the left of the canvas fragments of a woman seem to fall back and away into the mêlée of fluid whilst a grey

sketchy view of a male back grounds the central plane. Threads and whorls of paint immerse the two figures and serve to join them together and these flowing, repetitive gestural brush strokes seem to pick the bodies up and move them throughout and across the canvas.

Ettinger talks of co-emergence and co-fading where participants in an encounter share space simultaneously and are involved in a transformative exchange of energies. She says of these connections that “Non-definite compositions are exchanges, experience, phantasy and motion are shared through slippery borderlinks” (1994, p. 14). *Trouble in Paradise* expresses such slippery connective threads and also reveals faces, mouths and body parts that seem to hover on the edge of realization before disappearing or fading away. There is a constant flux and movement where images seem to coagulate and take form then they become incoherent and lose themselves again. The fleshy colouration of the painting directly references the body in a passionate exchange and is also suggestive of the emotional energies released in erotic play. Rachel Taylor says this implies “that what is visible in the paintings may be as much to do with the viewer’s projected desires as the artist’s intention” (2003,

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/brown-trouble-in-paradise-t07606>).

As a result the viewer is included in the network of threads and intersections and part of the co-making of the work. All of these pictorial elements reveal the physicality of painting and the expressive visceral nature of Brown’s involvement in the creation of the work. As the painting



is quite large one can imagine her stretching and connecting physically with the canvas, involved and immersed in the performance of making.

Both *Summer Love*, (2000), and *Hard Fast and Beautiful* (2005) repeat these themes using similar painterly strategies to simultaneously reveal and obscure the body as well as the action within the frame. However, where *Performance* and *Summer Love* all sustain enough figuration to reveal easily recognizable themes, *Hard Fast and Beautiful* is more amorphous and abstracted.



Figure 36: Cecily Brown, *Summer Love*, 2000, oil on linen 190.5 x 228.6 cm, image source Thomas Holdings Inc. Collection Deichtorhallen Hamburg

*Summer Love* [is like no other love?<sup>19</sup>] (Figure 36) retains clear figuration which elides into the mostly abstract ground. The female figure exerts a central visually strong presence, once again depicting an angular, active inverted “T” shaped formal structure to anchor and activate the canvas. The male figure is a plinth, stable and quite relaxed, seemingly immobile, almost inert beneath the more energetic female form. In all three paintings the woman is the active presence and the man can be read as in a more passive or, taking Bordo’s thoughts into consideration, receptive state. Co-poïesis is occurring through a form of open “compassionate erotic hospitality” (Ettinger, 2005, p. 709)

Although visually similar to the other two paintings, *Hard Fast and Beautiful*, (2005) (Figure 37), with almost the same subject matter and cruciform format, pushes the theme further. The male figure has been abstracted to the point that he is a smear of paint with the suggestion of a phallus, while the woman is a sketchy presence. Both are treated in the same fashion, essentially as wild expressions of sexual energy. This work seems to be on the same continuum as *Performance* but abstracted until it describes the sketchiest and most instantaneous moment, almost calligraphic in form.

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<sup>19</sup>*Summer love* is like no other love, one of the Australian pop group Sherbert’s better known songs and lyrics.

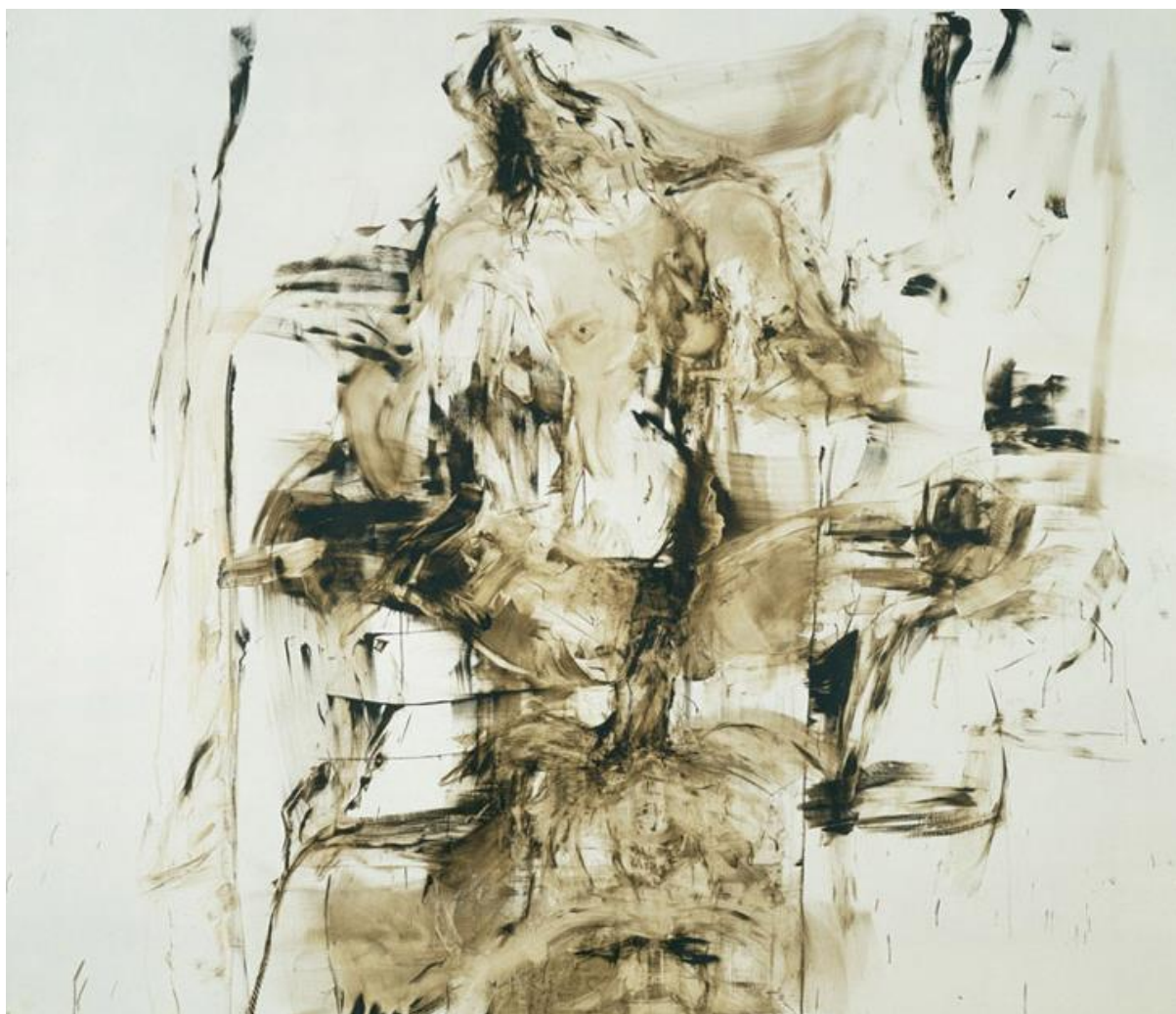


Figure 37: Cecily Brown, *Hard, Fast and Beautiful*, 2005, oil on canvas, 254 x 279 cm, image source Saatchi Gallery website

Compared to the earlier work *Hard, Fast and Beautiful* relies almost entirely on the expressive qualities of the line, including the broad squeegee stroke, as opposed to the reasonably figurative approach still evident in *Performance*. It reveals an energetic moving trace and implies the idea and feelings of sex and passion. Both works include the male figure yet in each there is no sense of a particular identity as in the case of Sleight or Sharpe. The abstraction serves to depersonalize the figures, both male and female, while simultaneously alluding to the mysterious nature of sex. So, although it is clear that we are witnessing sexual play, we do not see

clinically described carnality but a fierce energetic emotional and physical aspect of it. The paint works as a form of veiling. Elements of this process link closely to Semmel's aim to depict sexual acts from her own perspective, particularly in regard to the emotional aspect, as both artists use the paint to colour their work with an emotional patina, an overlay of energy, whilst depicting erotica from a female artist's viewpoint.

*Hard Fast and Beautiful* particularly provides an example of co-poietic expression, especially through the way in which the figures blend and transform. The figures retain some level of individual formal structure but also morph into one another, fading and emerging- co-fading and co-emerging. Through the blurred squeegee marks the bodies appear to be in motion and in the process of changing into a combined chimeric creature. They almost reflect one another and work in tandem to create that new being. This approach sets up links that start to weave out of the painting and create links to other spaces, and can be seen in the loose quick strike of the brush or the wiping motions which emerge out of the top and bottom of the frame. This blurring and erasure is also evident in the work *New Laboutin Pumps*, (2005) (Figure 38) which sets the coupled figures up in a boudoir or bedroom.





Figure 38: Cecily Brown, *New Laboutin Pumps* 2005, oil on canvas, 206 x 205 cm. Private collection  
copyright Cecily Brown, image source Rob McKeever.

Although *New Laboutin Pumps*, (2005) is quite monochrome the two figures push forward from a chaotic background to form a strong central focal presence. The level of abstraction as compared to the earlier works has also increased so that the couple, though still evident, are less defined than the figures in *Performance* or *Summer Love*, for example. Sweeping broad strokes, wiped away, using a large squeegee perhaps, create a great sense of movement and energy but also erases and morphs the figures into one

another. They become a writhing mass of flesh. As with Semmel and Sharpe, there are references to the sensual nature of sexuality, and the polymorphous tactility and flow of sex. Although the three women use divergent painterly techniques they express similar themes focused on aspects of female sexuality. This manner of revealing and then wiping away the paint in a broad sweep is similar to Gerhard Richter's use of a very large squeegee to achieve a rapid sense of movement in his work. The effect is the same as there is a lyrical rhythmic movement across and outside the canvas.

*New Laboutin Pumps* playfully alludes to the fetishization of shoes, high-heeled fantasy objects closely aligned to sexual allure and provocation. Here the couple are intertwined amorously in a boudoir, the pumps providing the woman with a means of positioning herself strongly. The pumps are just that, leverage for the lovers against a dressing table. Rather than name them "stilettos" or, the more pedestrian, "shoes", Brown uses the term "pump" which legitimately describes them but also cheekily suggests that as they are firmly propped upon the table the woman can use them as a means of pumping against the man. Visually the work is very active, physical and this mischievous nomenclature highlights the erotic nature of the painting. Brown is capturing a brief moment in time, the blink of an eye, an irreverent wink to the viewer.

All of these works are large-scale canvases which lends them to generating an immersive experience, where the viewer is overwhelmed and bombarded with visual cues. This establishes the figure as larger than life and

produces a sense of being flooded with such visions, which work outside the frame and fall out to meet the viewer. The abstract nature of the works also enhances the sense of audience participation as the viewer needs to engage closely with the painting in order to understand and decipher what is going on. The spectator is working in collaboration with the artist and the painting, forming co-poietic strings. In addition, the physical energy required to work at this scale also underpins the works. There is almost a sense of what would be usually considered masculine energy in the delivery of such extensive canvases. The physicality of working with the fleshiness of paint is also an important element; the paint in all its slippery materiality and lushness both reflects Brown's enjoyment in working with it but also suggests the tactile, almost visceral, nature of flesh.

## CONCLUSION

Semmel, Sharpe and Brown all employ both women and men in the frame when expressing their erotic desires and fantasies, which establishes a means of preventing sexual objectification of either of the figures. Their paintings reveal a particularly private and intimate world into which the male figure has been invited to enter. This allows the artist and model or models to meet and create the environment of generous or compassionate hospitality required for co-poiesis to occur. The inclusion of the female figure also tends to shift the rationale and focus of such works away from the specifics of either a male or female figure whilst establishing partial subjectivity and shared emergence within the frame. Semmel says that she

was looking for a form of erotica and visual language that met her needs and sexual proclivities and as a consequence her work is not specifically about the male body. It is about reclamation of the body as well as communication between men and women with generous, respectful and non-objectifying, though still sexual, situation. Sharpe too shares the frame and simultaneously claims her own female erotic experience whilst including the male figure in her world view. Brown, as noted, also presents herself or her view of sexual play in such a manner that we are offered a feminine viewpoint which shares the space with the male figure without denigrating it.

Linking these paintings together is the way in which the female figure is frequently a strong and active figure in the frame. This occurs with all three artists, so that although the male figure is integral, sharing subjectivity, and important to the resolution of all of the works, the woman is often equally active or even ascendant, sometimes quite subtly so, as with Semmel, and more obviously with Sharpe and Brown. The couples seem to be involved in positional changes, and through that movement they are transforming and involved in trans-subjective interactions. This still sets the scene for shared partial subjectivity as without the male figure the works would not make sense.

All three artists mentioned in this chapter appear to enjoy the materiality of paint, which seems to lend itself to an especially rich means of working that not only demonstrates pleasure in using it, but also evokes other senses beside vision. The whole body is involved in the act of making and when the



works are large this stretches the physical capacity of the artist when they are involved in the practice of working in a large format –as all three artists here have done. As noted by Rosemary Betterton painting practice is performative rather than purely representational (2004, p. 2) and this exemplifies how the act of co-poïesis can occur through the way in which the painter, model and audience relate to one another. This is demonstrated through the way in which painting usually requires engagement with the sitter but it also requires physical interaction between the artist and her intentions, paint and canvas which suggests a deeply intimate set of processes that often bring into focus sense of smell, sight, and touch; in other words the whole body involved in the making. The artistic encounter involves the body through movement and gestural cadences and this aligns with Ettinger's construction of trans-subjective exchanges and encounters. Within the pictorial frame this is highlighted by the physical textures of the works, but also by references to the senses within the paintings; breaking crockery, a waterfall, the smell of paint, perfume and turpentine, the sounds of lovers, a rug or a sheepskin underfoot.

These references to, and traces of, other environmental textures and sensations are employed by all three women and evidence the use of the matrixial flow, where not only do they reveal their personal involvement with the sitter but their images work outside the frame to create interactions with the spectator and the world at large. These images

develop networks and skeins, push out of the picture towards the viewer and initiate connections and encounters.

This theme of connection, trans-subjectivity and co-making is further examined in the following chapter where the use of connection between artist and subject is established primarily through play and humour.



## CHAPTER 4: CO-POÏESIS AND PLAY; THE ROLE OF PLAY AND HUMOUR IN THE WORK OF BARBARA DE GENEVIEVE AND POLLY BORLAND

### INTRODUCTION

Monsters were defeated by laughter (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 39)

Woman generates her jouissance, not as they say or fear, a hole , but a passage or a bridge between what is most earthly and what is most celestial (Irigaray. 1991,p. 190)

In Chapter three co-poïesis was identified as a form of co-making between couples who share subjectivity in artworks. This viewpoint highlights the way in which partial subjectivity allows for the figure or figures of male and female bodies to simultaneously emerge into focus within those artworks. The three artists discussed in the previous chapter were largely concerned with erotic encounters between the couples depicted, the artist who creates the image and the viewer who brings their own erotic trace – in whatever form that it takes- into the frame. This sets up a series of conjunctions that take place both within and beyond the work itself.

In the context of this research I propose that both play and humour are also important devices through which co-poïesis can be achieved, in the sense that such attributes can be used to defuse the capacity of a spectator to objectify the body and also evidence aspects of the metamorphic borderlinking identified by Bracha Ettinger. Play and humour provide another strategy to achieve the idea of collaborative making and shared subjectivity, not by ridiculing the body but by gently stressing our common

humanity and innate delight in one another through the development of playful bonds.

Polly Borland and Barbara de Genevieve have both employed play and humour as an important element in their portrayal of the male body and some of their works which utilize this strategy will be the focus of this chapter. In the process we will see how these female artists become “playful erotic revolutionaries” in their dealings with the male figure (Isaak, 1996, p. 17) and how play and humour establishes the conditions for co-poïesis.

## IN THEORY

Isaak (1996, p. 2) suggests that women use play to disrupt and to “go beyond established or fixed meanings into the realm of non-sense” in other words into the realms of the unreal, the imaginary through play. This idea is extended by Bracha Ettinger who talks of forms of somatic experience that involve immersion, tactility and playful physical engagement, a state that suggests a receptive opening of the body and senses. Ettinger proposes actively crossing between states. This position is more extensive and broadly applicable than the association of a male spectatorship and the gaze and woman with the non-visual senses and tactility- old binary oppositions. The flow and interplay of energy between participants is non-specific, allowing for transference to occur without reference to sexual orientation or gender. Ettinger says that this can occur where co-poïesis “is used in terms of reciprocal but different trans-psychic engendering of

partial subjects by one another in the matrixial borderspace” (1997, p. 633). There might be differing degrees of involvement but not necessarily barriers to it. This in turn provides for all manner of sensual expression, visual, tactile and olfactory without preferring any one over the other. In essence, these ideas of play and the sense of the lived body are integral to human experience.

Although there is a direct almost instantaneous association of play with childhood, it still has diverse associations for the adult, which includes nostalgia and a desire to recapture its pleasures and freedoms. We also see play as something we have in common with other species and perhaps an aspect of our animal selves, where the necessary physical skills life requires are practiced and mimicked before we attain an adult state.

Underpinning play are several important elements, all of which have been referred to obliquely within this research. Play is used as a bonding mechanism between a parent and a child or between adults in love play, allowing for an intimate rapport to develop between the actors. We use play to understand our bodily capabilities, limits and relationship to the world, to comprehend and master tools and gain proficiency and skills with such artefacts. Play creates and sustains linkages between others as a social construct and it helps build language, intellect, and neuroplasticity within the brain as well as building imaginary possibilities and memes within our thinking processes. Consequently play, whilst seemingly inconsequential, is an intrinsic and powerful aspect of human behaviour.

Hans-Georg Gadamer states “those who have looked deeply into human nature have recognized that our capacity for play is an expression of the highest seriousness” (1986, p. 130). It is an extremely significant business in which:

Play and seriousness seem to be interwoven and in a still deeper sense, it is immediately apparent that any form of serious activity is shadowed by the possibility of playful behaviour (Gadamer, 1986, p. 124).

Play is used to examine the body and, through this exploration, highlights our collective interest in what it means to be human. Huizinga goes so far as to far as to argue that play is the defining characteristic of being human (Huizinga, 1949 foreword<sup>20</sup>).

In this chapter the way in which artists build on and represent the body in imaginative, playful and sometimes humorous ways to produce different readings of the male body is highlighted. It can be taken to mean both imaginary play which encourages creativity as well as exploring and playing with ideas about the body and the world at large, both forms of make believe. This also provides for co-poïesis where the interaction and resonance of the players allows for the creation of new things. Through play and art we are asked as viewers to see things differently or anew in ways “in which we can catch sight of ourselves in a way that is often unexpected or unfamiliar” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 130).

These serious concerns are contained within a framework of playful encounters and visual whimsy, which mask the intentions but often reveal

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<sup>20</sup> “civilization arises and unfolds in and as play” (Huizinga, 1949)

the underlying issues common to all human interactions. One of the themes developed in this chapter is how Barbara de Genevieve and Polly Borland look at men in a deeply mischievous and irreverent manner, in the process exemplifying their particular gaze or viewpoint, whilst still preserving the dignity of their subjects and creating flowing co-poietic webs and intersubjective connections.

#### BARBARA DE GENEVIEVE

Barbara De Genevieve provides an entry point into both a feminist response to the male body and a humour-infused, multilayered commentary on a range of ideas: the gaze; the other; exoticism; as well as playing on the association of women with the decorative arts in her photographic set *True Life Novelette* (1979). This series employs an amalgam of pop culture and ‘true romance’ iconography overlaid by a strong reference to erotic Japanese shunga<sup>21</sup> prints, exemplified through the use of rich materials and backgrounds as a means to highlight the sex of the male figure. Shunga prints use similar techniques to block all or most of the body, other than the conjunction point at the, usually oversized, genitals where the sexual act takes place. The spectator is provided with a beautiful frame to see the erotic interaction. De Genevieve also uses a similar framing strategy to focus on parts of the naked male body, especially the groin, in some of her pictures. Within this convention, De Genevieve particularly speaks of

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<sup>21</sup> Japanese erotic shunga or spring pictures which depicted both the erotic life of courtesans and graphic sexual depictions for the pleasure of the viewer using beautiful backgrounds and materials to highlight the sexual actors in the scene.

the gaze and overturns the usual position of the male viewer and the female subject. Effectively, De Genevieve applies a humorous lens to this concern by picking up the viewer and viewed conundrum and reversing the roles or positions so that the female views the male.

In this instance the male figure is the erotic focus. However, the serious nature of the dialogue is defused by contrasting rich visual textures with an overlay of short, humorous, textual asides much like a speech bubble in a comic. If this were merely a positional reversal that sustains the status quo between viewer and viewed, with the same imbalance implied by that relationship, the images would be, perhaps, just another pointed commentary. Instead, De Genevieve applies a textual annotation that leads the spectator beyond the obvious ploy of reversing the male and female relationship. She uses these playful, seemingly disingenuous witticisms to highlight issues about masculinity such as male sexual performance, penis size, as well as the role and interactions of men and women insofar as who pursues whom.

The male need to safeguard the groin, especially during sporting activity, is examined in *The Jockstrap* (1979) (Figure 39) with a subtext “*She was always strangely curious about the function of the jockstrap*”, revealing a set of behaviours largely outside female experience and essentially part of a world that particularly excludes women. As the hand passes through and under the body there is also a combined sense of an erotic frisson, an interpretation of the action of a rugby play and the potential to destabilize the body by pulling it over and toppling the figure.





Figure 39: Barbara De Genevieve, 1979, *True Life Novelette 7: The Jockstrap*, image source Repro von Kanel, in Weiermair (1995).

Cropping the body, so that the focal point is squarely centred on the genitals cupped by the hand, indicates that this is a deliberate tactic to show that particular element of the image. This full frontal aspect presents

the subject for the look. However, the written textual note overlays this obvious presentational strategy and opens it up to a comical interpretation. Added to this playfulness, the floral background softens the image by suggesting the sensuality of a garden and once again plays with the idea of the womanly association with decorative arts and home decor. This resembles the way in which Sylvia Sleigh uses gardens and interior design elements in her paintings, in her case to denote a sensual domestic or private environment. De Genevieve is perhaps being more acerbic by playing with the trope and insinuating that this domestic interior is not about macramé. At the same time the hand covering the groin has the same function as a fig leaf has in terms of covering the penis on statuary. However, the hand is inadequate to the task insofar as it partially reveals the genitals and focuses the viewer's attention on them, as a fig leaf does. Through this "gesture the woman appropriates the symbol of male power, making it the subject of her sex play" (Negrin, 2015, personal communication).



Figure 40: Barbara De Genevieve, 1979, *True Life Novelette 15: Allegory*, image source Repro von Kanel, in Weiermair (1995).

The use of the floral decorative screen or curtaining in a form of theatron is used again in *True Life Novelette 15: "Allegory"* (1979) (Figure 40) to build on the shunga erotic interplay. The head of the male subject has been



cropped out causing the body to be all about the genitals, and removing any sense of the man other than as a sexual signifier<sup>22</sup>. Almost hidden in the obscuring curtain a finger lifts the penis forward so that it is presented more clearly to the spectator.



Figure 41: Hiroshige, *Genjimon*, 1840, 25.4 x 19.05 cm

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<sup>22</sup>In the shunga tradition the genitals are of prime importance, often enlarged and usually without the rest of the body in view, see Figure 41.

In contrast to the typical or usual shunga image the woman has been excised from these scenes, although she is possibly referred to, obliquely, in the fold of the curtain and perhaps through the use of floral imagery as a signifier of female sexuality. If that is the case the male figure does not penetrate the metaphoric fold but withdraws from it and is in turn enfolded. The finger of the hidden person also suggests that within the curtain there is another figure secretly supporting and encapsulating the body of the man. There are filmy layers here, where we are drawn into historical imagery, performance, masquerades, as well as involving time and duration and the fascination of erotic play.

This use of the highly decorative background to showcase the male figure is continued in *True Life Novelette 12: Vanity*, (1979) (Figure 42) where it is again coupled with another pithy comment “he looked at himself quite often – and always with the magnifying side of the mirror”.





Figure 42: Barbara De Genevieve, *True Life Novelette 12: Vanity*, 1979, image source Repro von Kanel, in Weiermair (1995).



This picture plays with a common historical pictorial convention where, as Berger describes it:

You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting Vanity, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure (Berger, 1972, p. 45).

If one's starting point is that men might be accused of overemphasizing their virtues and attributes, placing the mirror in the hand of a man opens up a plethora of irreverent, playful possibilities. The hypocrisy to which Berger alludes is manifest in this image, where De Genevieve remarks on a long-held tradition of the vanity trope, which places the onus of narcissism on women. She sees the man as immediately trying to reinforce and magnify his imagined power and being entirely focused on the penis as the source of such strength; which in turn highlights the link between the anxiety experienced over penis size and such fears. He is obsessed with this search for strength and has to keep looking for it or at it to reinforce his self-belief. In this work De Genevieve is also taking on the role of the gazer. Through that positional change she destabilizes the equilibrium of the interchange whilst still leaving a humorous stinging commentary.

Added to this observational play on male anxiety is a strong commentary on Lacan's (1949, p. 620) hypothesis on the mirror phase in childhood development; where the very young child recognizes himself in the mirror and ultimately experiences an ongoing argument with and about the self, concerning the gap between the ideal and real and his incapacity to ever

realize or attain that idealized image. Again this is a very clever play on the futility, or vanity, of this pursuit and neatly articulates the link between male anxiety about penis size and the concurrent malaise arising, according to Lacan, from the schism between the real and idealized self.

Similarly *True Life Novelette 16: Keeping it up* (1979) (Figure 43) deals directly with such anxiety and toys with the issue by suggesting all one needs is a piece of string to sustain an erection. Initially, if the image is scrutinized without the text it is quite a mysterious picture. The patterned background suggests ocelot print fake-fur verging on a form of kitsch luridness associated with burlesque or the strip tease. Added to this insinuation of theatrical sexuality is the way in which the male sex has been tied up with string, again suggesting bondage or a sexual fetish.

The string sets up a diagonal linear movement across the frame and disappears in behind the man's leg which disrupts the integrity of the 'V' shaped tie holding up his penis. This disappearance leads the eye back into the fold of the curtain which adds to the mysteriousness of the situation and raises the question, "is there someone holding or pulling the string?" Finally, adding text defuses the possibility that this is a purely sexual image and offers the viewer a humorous aside in which they are complicit.



Figure 43: Barbara De Genevieve, *True Life Novelette 16: Keeping it up*, 1979, image source Repro von Kanel, in Weiermair (1995).

De Genevieve is teasingly mocking the fragility of male ego which is tied up with sustaining an erection.

This theme is continued in a playful, fake-disingenuous manner in *True Life Novelette 17: The Misunderstanding* (1979.) (Figure 44), the misunderstanding being that if it is accepted that men are able to view or consume pornographic images then women should be able to as well. However, the subject blocks the camera, in much the same way a well-known political figure caught in flagrante might hold up a hand to obscure himself from paparazzi, effectively disabusing this notion that a woman could either make such images or that a man would allow her to do so. This work comments on the power of the gaze and the masculine interest in maintaining the status quo, refusing to allow the same form of gaze to which women have historically been subjected.

Once again the scene is established as a framed theatrical set in which the male figure is firmly cropped and centred. Although the genitals are strongly highlighted and form the main visual point, the hand, raised and pushed out of the picture, serves to block the viewer's access to the image. De Genevieve is questioning the hypocrisy associated with masculine voyeurism that opens up the female body to the male gaze but simultaneously denies the reciprocal exchange of position. Using the same visual strategies as the other works in the series she calls to mind the opulent staging of a study or den in which the man wears his smoking jacket, smokes a cigar and sips port whilst perusing his collection of saucy postcards. This man refuses entrée to the female viewer.



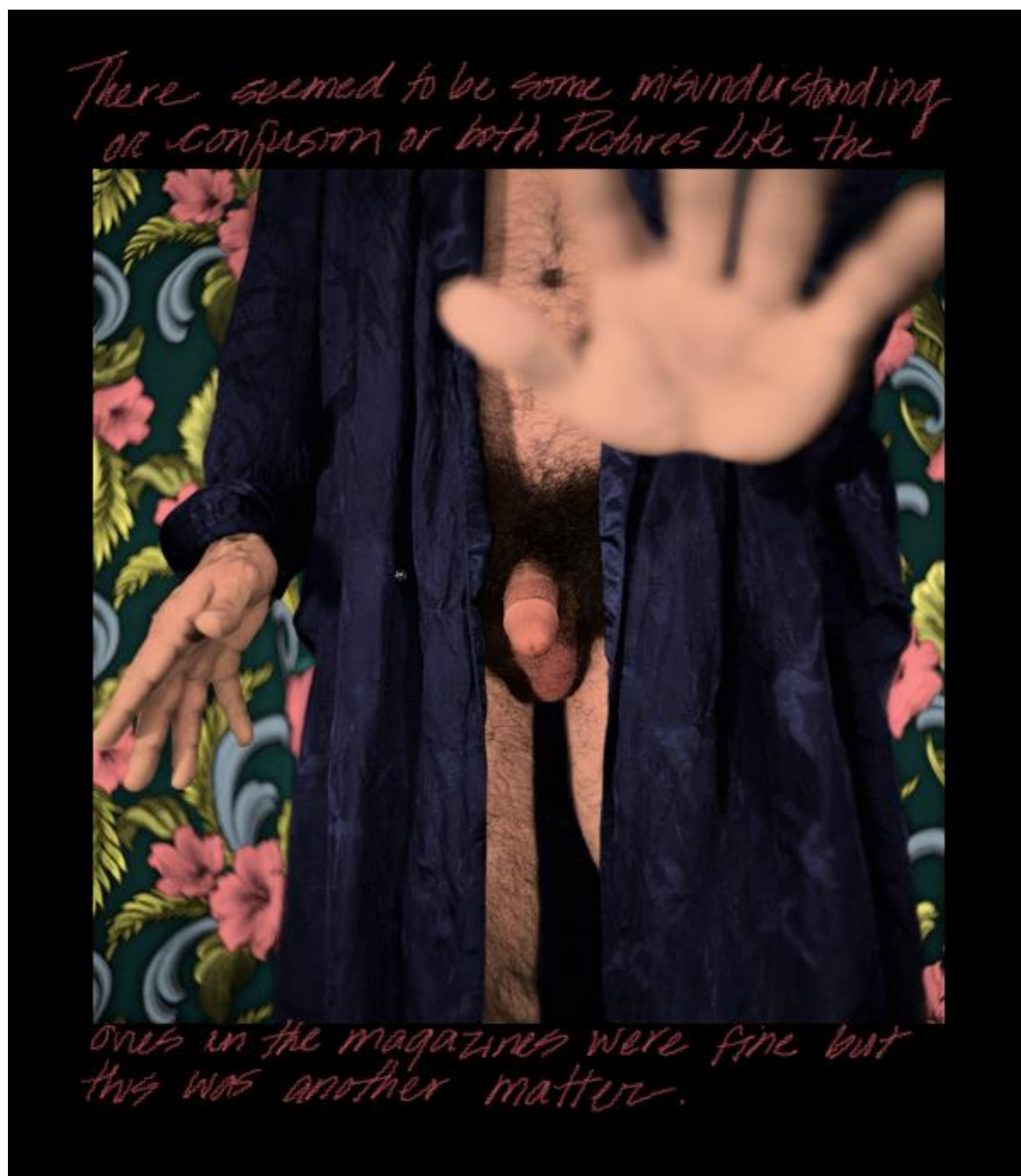


Figure 44: Barbara De Genevieve, *True Life Novelette 17: The Misunderstanding*, 1979, image source Repro von Kanel, in Weiermair (1995).

De Genevieve is also reminding us of the “true romance” comics which became popular with young women during the post-war period in the late 1940s. Usually the true romance genre deals with the trials and tribulations of young women and the life dramas that they experience as they try to attract and keep a man (Gardner, 2011). The questions that

might trouble them about their plain looks, or frumpy figure, their inability to attract a lover suggest that the girls are bedevilled by the minefield of social proscriptions they experience when trying to deal with middle class morés. De Genevieve is playfully appropriating this generic self-conscious young woman obsessing about her hair or how far she can go sexually with her boyfriend without losing her reputation and replacing her with a man. Instead of witnessing the inner angst of a young woman we are shown the man dramatically worrying about his penis size or his reputation (*True life Novelette #17 The Misunderstanding*).

The series relies on double entendre, play and the transformation of a trope associated with female adolescent fantasy to provide a pointed yet humorous commentary on the insidiousness of white middle class culture, especially as Gardner highlights (2011, p. 119) they were usually written by older men. Whilst being aware of the form of such comics the viewer is given the bones of a narrative that she can transform and reimagine.

The way in which De Genevieve plays and uses humour is in no way kittenish. Her play is more concerned with the play of ideas and an examination of the fierce debate at that time on the nature of the gaze and the possibility and composition of a female gaze. However, she does couch her serious concerns within a witty framework that satirizes them. She is literally “bearding the dragon”, the penis, by employing a full frontal presentation of the male figure which focuses on the groin. As the obvious site of male sexuality the phallus serves to reverse the focus of the gaze almost as a means of saying “how do you like being the object of female



attention?” This too highlights how much of a taboo looking at the penis, is especially for a woman.

Laughter is used as means to diminish the power of prevailing cultural structures, where the joke functions as a bond between “teller and listener” or in this case viewer, artist and the model where everyone is laughing with as opposed to laughing at (Bakhtin, 1965).

#### POLLY BORLAND

Similarly, Polly Borland uses playful theatrical imagery to stage her work. She engages in an interactive fashion with her subjects, increasing the level of connectivity into a plane or “borderspace of connections which are positive, active and aware” (Vigneault, 2009). Borland favours an exchange of both the look and energy between the subject and herself, whilst working to explore the body as a site of experience and playful encounters.

Taking into consideration the wider meanings of play, the work of Polly Borland exemplifies how she plays in terms of exploring her world using playful or humour-infused imagery to define “what it is to be alive” (Borland, 2010). She also asks us to see ourselves in different ways, as Gadamer would suggest, creating images of the male body in unfamiliar guises and in ways that are disquietingly and potentially erotically charged. Her works are perhaps asking us to play “let’s pretend” as a way of investigating identity, sexuality and alienation, and has something of a preoccupation with the simultaneously attractive and repellent nature of

the body. Both the series *Smudge* and *The Babies*, the latter discussed in Chapter 5, reveal this interest in the common humanity of the male, and female, body. Arguably neither series stresses nudity, often concealing the genital details of the body, but also revealing a sense of the psychological nakedness and vulnerability of her subjects. This approach, where the artist and model are both participating in the making and development of the work is also an intrinsic aspect of the matrixial framework. Borland and her models create something quite new out of the body, through accentuation, augmentation and veiling the figure. This co-poietic practice means that there are transformations occurring in terms of our understanding of the body and in her translation of it.

#### SMUDGE: “WE PLAYED DRESS UPS”

Borland (2012) says that she has always had an interest in theatre, role playing, “let’s pretend” and dress ups, at one point revealing that she used props as a child to pretend to be a male stating “I wanted to be a boy”. Leaving aside the personal psychological drivers, this does suggest that she is deeply interested in trying on new roles and assuming different guises in order to express hidden facets of her own inner life; in turn creating new visions for and perhaps incidentally of herself. In order to manifest this latent image she asks other people to come into the space with her and she says “I was playing with my imagination; it’s like child’s play mixed with adult subconscious” (Borland in interview with Self, 2010). One of her

collaborators and cronies, Nick Cave, said that she invited him over to play dress-ups:

Polly squeezed me into body stockings, rubber bathing caps, crotch-accentuating leotards; she shoved ping pong balls down the front of a lycra tankini, attached cow udders to my face, rouged my nipples, pulled shredded panty hose over my head; wigs were put on backward - electric blue ones, blonde ones, horrid ones made of rusted steel wool, she'd glued phallic noses on my forehead, fright wigged me, squeezed me into glam-rock boob tubes (introduction to *Smudge*, 2010).

Borland is working both at a performative level, interacting physically with the subject's body as well as making a visual record of this interplay. She is asking herself "what would a thing, previously unimagined, look like if I made it?", and showing us something we have not seen before. This is within the sphere of intellectual imaginative play which produces a new thing from what is, effectively, creative doodling. The body in this case becomes a matrix from which to hang layers of innuendo and signifiers of eroticism. In addition this functions as a co-poietic transformation where the two participants, artist and model, play and interact together to create something outside themselves. This aligns well with Ettinger's concepts in terms of how the two separate individuals create, through trans-subjective engagement and co-emergence, a hybrid creation.

There is not so much overt nudity and often only partial nakedness in Borland's work, but this serves to highlight the body in disturbing or provocative ways. The props are a form of "[clothing] whose function is paradoxical rather than marginal, their primary function being to make the

body look naked” (Barcan, 2004, p. 16). This might be exemplified by proposing that if the female body is draped and decorated with feathers, fur and gewgaws, this is often construed as being within the realm of burlesque theatre where sexual inferences are interplayed with humour and double entendre. If the male body is similarly arrayed it is also associated with a particular aspect of gay/homosexual culture normally seen in Mardi Gras or reviews where men pretend to be women. However, Borland has shifted the focus in *Smudge* towards something that takes elements of the carnival and burlesque but does not seem to infer either heterosexual or homosexual gender roles. Humour and eroticism are intertwined in such images. Cave (2010) says he had a great deal of fun being dressed up but he also felt that the resultant images are sexually loaded.

The fact that in this series Borland does not use names or descriptive titles also suggests that she is adding layers of masking, or masquerade, onto her subjects. Along with the skins she uses masks and props and this keeps safe the identity, and gender, of her sitters and co-conspirators allowing them to frolic freely, whilst revealing quite startlingly augmented aspects of their physiognomy.<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin (1965, pp. 39-40) says that the mask provides us with the capacity to change and be reincarnated as well as violate natural boundaries and be free of the usual prohibitions we experience in daily life. Consequently as it is not always possible to see if the body depicted is male or female, the viewer is left with a fascinated and

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<sup>23</sup>She does treat both male and female figures in this series in a consistent manner which is in itself an interesting element of the works, but for the purposes of this research the female figures are largely out of scope.

amused sense of the mysterious nature of such presences. As noted in previous chapters, fully revealing the sex of the figure removes room for the imagination to fill in the potential nature and state of the phallus.

Conversely masking it or suggesting it in other ways allows for mystery and libidinous interest to return. This sense of the slightly inexplicable and hidden nature of the body is expressed in many of the images in the *Smudge* series especially where it appears to fade as an obvious human shape only to re-emerge as something else, accentuated and configured in strange ways.

Underpinning these broader themes there are strong references to the playful freedom and radicalism of the carnival or festival as well as the equally liberating use of the grotesque figure, both of which originate from Medieval cultural practices and play (Bakhtin, 1965). This is evidenced by the subversive and humorous nature of some of the images in the *Smudge* series. Bakhtin says:

The carnival-grotesque form exercises the same function: to consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. The carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things (1965, p. 34).

This is evidenced by the subversive and humorous nature of some of the images in the *Smudge* series. Borland is, indeed, seeking to reveal a new form of the figure, presenting us with fertile new forms of the body and to

liberate it from conventions that the nude is only concerned with the female body or the body beautiful. To create these forms many of her figures take on the appearance of the grotesque.

Traditionally the grotesque body is often shown with bulbous forms, excrescences and protuberances denoting a form of generative untrammelled growth. Similarly Borland uses various formal devices, such as the phallic nose or wigs, to create these growths that reach outside the body and reference sexual markers. Bakhtin suggests that these rather base elements often refer to the reproductive and faecal aspects of the body, the parts that allow ingress and egress of materials and through which the world enters or leaves; essentially exaggerated, fecund elements which provoke laughter and regeneration in humanity. (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 19, p. 62, p. 320)

The carnival and the grotesque are also universal ideas which encourage participation and freedom for all, rather than separate individual solipsisms. This aligns with the concept of the matrix, where the focus is on forming human connections and relationships, co-mingling. In the carnival this is created through everyone participating and living in the moment. Borland performs in this role by her close interaction with her subject, physically touching and working with props and the body within the process of making the work. She also invites an exchange of energy between the subject and the viewer through her use of this form of joyful play. She and her model are both working in a co-poietic fashion and transforming the body through growth of transgressive metamorphic links.



Play and interaction set up the conditions for transformative encounters. In Ettinger's parlance this is a space of "compassionate hospitality" where there are generous, willing reciprocal openings between the subjects presented.

*Untitled, XIII*, (2010) (Figure 45) covers the body with a tightly stretched skin which tends to accentuate the figure even more strongly than if it had been depicted naked; additionally, although the body is clearly that of a man, it has been partly disguised using a pair of clownish wigs, which increases the potential for a comical response. This traditional association with play and donning a wig is noted by Huizinga (1949, p. 183) who says that "There is no single article that illustrated more aptly the playfulness of the cultural impulse than the periwig". The incongruous placement of one of the wigs just above the groin not only emphasises the pubis, by alluding to its close proximity but symbolically exteriorises the genitals by using phallic forms. In addition Borland plays on the form of the grotesque through the use of the sexual parts as repeated exteriorized motifs. As Bakhtin proposes that such elements represent basic fundamental, scatological faecal or sexual aspects of the body, these images provide the means to play on those tropes. Not only do the wigs bulge and extrude comically they refer to broader human fertility and generative energies.



Figure 45: Polly Borland, *Smudge Series, Untitled XIII*, 2010, chromogenic print 76. x 65 cm, image source Gloria Actar Birkhäuser, Polly Borland: *Smudge* (2010), Barcelona/NY.

The adornment comes more strongly into focus as a result of this simple spatial format, and the shadowy nether regions beneath the clown wig merkin become a site for both scrutiny and mirth. Again this allusion to the pubic wig is both playful and naughty, leading the viewer to think of the sexual play associated with decorative wigs used to cover the groin and titillate the spectator.

The juxtaposition between the mouth and the genitals might also allude to aspects of childhood versus adult sexuality, where the mouth is viewed as the infant's original source of pleasure as exemplified through gratuitous sucking of the thumb or a toe (Kahn, 2002). This theme continues in other images, such as *Untitled VI*, *Untitled I* and *Untitled XI* all of which directly allude to the phallic stage in childhood development where the young child experiences sexual pleasure through stimulation of the genitals (Freud, *Kindle locations 946-1060*).

*Untitled VI*, (2010) (Figure 46) continues the use of whimsical props to firstly conceal the body and then reveal it again by using the combination of a long body covering wig and a red-tipped false nose to suggest a phallus. This too sustains and continues a well-known traditional trope of associating the size of the nose with the purported size, and sexual prowess of the penis. However, the nose emerging from the drooping hair suggests a gormless helplessness, and the stance of the figure with its belly thrust forward and arms behind the back is very childlike. There is both innocence and salaciousness in this work.



Figure 46: Polly Borland, *Smudge Series Untitled VI*, 2010, chromogenic print 76.x 65 cm, image source Gloria Actar Birkhäuser, Polly Borland: *Smudge*, (2010), Barcelona/NY.

Using the hair to cover the body in this instance also trades on the idea of both Lady Godiva and Cousin Itt<sup>24</sup> so not only does Borland reference the female figure, through suggesting Godiva, but also makes the association with the humorous fictional male figure, Cousin Itt, who is both covered with long hair but is also, in the *Addams Family* film, reputed to be a

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<sup>24</sup>A fictional character from the *Addams Family* movie, who has a reputation as a seductive philanderer.

philanderer under that coiffure (Sonnenfeld, 1991). Added to these light hearted double entendres there is also a strong sense of an Australian vernacular image in the form of the nonchalant “surfie” hippy type of the seventies (Borland, 2010) - a figure depicted and seen as sexy and masculine with, stereotypically, long blonde hair and a buffed body. This view might be supported by the fact that hair is often associated with sexuality and the animal nature of the human body. Consequently, this long hair suggests untrammelled and wild sexuality, coupled with, and in contrast to, the overly emphatic joke of the phallic nose.

Other images in the series use props and skins to mask and accentuate the body and the childlike nature of many of these pictures is repeated in *Untitled XXIX* (2010) (Figure 47) where the swaddled male figure tightly wrapped in pantyhose takes on the appearance of a kewpie doll.<sup>25</sup> Borland retrieves an image from her childhood and reinvents it to suit her adult self. This particular dolly peeps at himself questioning, disingenuously, “what’s down there?”. If he were truly a dolly, there would be nothing, but as a male body, presumably, the usual male physiognomy. The rather innocent gesture provokes gentle mirth through the dissonance of an adult male peering at himself in almost the same way as one would lift a dress. It is funny but also provocative. It is hard to read this complex, unexpected scenario. We are being shown and not shown. The artist is revealing something about manhood which we might not necessarily have noticed on our own, something openly vulnerable and humorous.

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<sup>25</sup>A little dolly designed by Rose O’Neill in the early 1900s.



Figure 47: Polly Borland, *Smudge Series, Untitled XXIX*, 2010, chromogenic print 76. x 65 cm, image source Gloria Actar Birkhäuser, Polly Borland: *Smudge* (2010), Barcelona/NY.

The juxtaposition of an ordinary embodied male figure in a feminine child pose is something of a prick to the viewer's sense of the absurd where Borland uses the ludic to raise questions about how the male body is viewed. In this way she does not so much mock the male figure as suggest that it can be seen with empathy, delight and humour without denigration.



Borland also demonstrates this through her direct involvement in setting up the scenarios, adjusting, touching and experimenting with the body, essentially revealing her compassionate regard for her subject. This reveals the body as a site of lived experience, one which sets up close interactions and exchanges.

Such a direct and close involvement continues whilst she works with her friend Nick Cave in *Untitled IV*, (Figure 48). She transforms him into an unrecognizable creature. He stands, almost hidden, covered beneath a taut skin and ping-pong balls, a strange blobby soldier standing stiffly to attention, arms back, hands inverted and his belly pressed forward. The pose is childlike, comical and awkward but intensely interesting. Borland provides an alternative vision of the male body, one which is funny and strangely compelling. One wants to look and understand the buboes, which suggest simultaneously diseased skin and vaudeville theatre, whoopee cushions, strange hoots and farting noises, Mr Gumby<sup>26</sup> shouting and awkwardly stumbling around. In fact it is hard not to look at many of the figures, they are so outré and playful, strange but essentially familiar, intrinsically human but writ large. Once again Borland is experimenting with the grotesque figure, revealing his strange excrescences and pustules, all potentially ripe to burst and let the inner body out past the borders of the flesh. She is establishing metramorphic links to the historical medieval trope, carrying it through modern theatrical elements, including her own

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<sup>26</sup>Monty Python, comical, awkward male figure who shouts a great deal, playing on the bumpkin

childhood and resituating the figure into the moments of her own engrossed fantastical world.



Figure 48: Polly Borland, Smudge Series, *Untitled, IV*, 2010, chromogenic print 76.0 x 65.0 cm, image source Gloria Actar Birkhäuser, Polly Borland: Smudge (2010), Barcelona/NY.

In conjunction with the props, wigs and prostheses, the physical stance and position of the figures accentuate the dramatic theatricality of the images. There is a strong sense of farcical overacting and burlesque in

some, if not all, of the pictures. *Untitled 1* (2010) (Figure 49) and *Untitled XI* (Figure 50) both use a phallic nose in combination with an exaggerated bodily placement which suggest, particularly in the former, that the actor is about to jauntily proclaim a piece of Dickensian or Churchillian hyperbole. Even so, *Untitled 1* with his hands tucked behind him is open to the viewer, thoughtful, strangely naked but for his skin coloured suit. The incongruity of his ordinary portly body and the Pinocchio nose suggest he is assuming a nonchalant innocence that is belied by the extended and perhaps growing proboscis. Similarly *Untitled XI*, (Figure 50), reveals the idea of thoughtful reverie, undercut by the silliness of his protuberant nose and the silky turban-like hair carefully arranged to cover his face.

Within this schema the relationship to the phallus and face is highlighted, once again linking oral sexuality with the penis and proboscis. This reappears as the obverse in *Untitled VIII* where the phallus is replaced by the vulva. However, it still carries an alignment with the mouth and the sex whilst also toying with gender tropes and feminizing the male body.



Figure 49: Polly Borland, *Smudge Series, Untitled I*, 2010, image source Gloria Actar Birkhäuser, Polly Borland: *Smudge* (2010), Barcelona/NY.



Figure 50: Polly Borland, *Smudge Series, Untitled XI*, 2010, image source Gloria Actar Birkhäuser, Polly Borland: *Smudge* (2010), Barcelona/NY

*Untitled VIII* (Figure 51) combines large false breasts with a nearly baroque wig to hide the masculine attributes of the sitter – a double bluff perhaps. Barcan (2004, p. 59) says that “femininity is a form of masquerade”. Joan Riviere (1929, pp 455-6) also discusses femininity in terms of it being used as a mask to deflect retribution from a powerful authority figure and as a means to both placate that figure and reduce the anxiety a woman might feel in the presence of such a person.





Figure 51: Polly Borland, *Smudge Series, Untitled VIII*, 2010, chromogenic print, 76 x 65 cm, image source Gloria Actar Birkhäuser, Polly Borland: *Smudge* (2010), Barcelona/NY.

Riviere says:

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it – much as a thief will offer to turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not stolen goods. (1929, p. 456)

This provides an interesting and complex set of ideas. Riviere is discussing a specific client's case and analysing her hidden masculinity. She is

suggesting that some traits associated with men, during her generation, such as professional acumen and standing as well as competence have been couched in a flirtatious mask of femininity in this client. This woman is hiding a great deal of competitiveness aimed at her colleagues, and both of her parents, which is masked by sexual coquettishness, hyper-femininity and being a “super” home-maker on top of her professional life. She is hiding her masculinity through this masquerade.

If, as Riviere suggests, femininity can be used as a form of masking to hide aspects of masculinity *Untitled VIII* (2010) reveals how Borland is playing with the idea of masking a real man with fake femininity. Although Riviere is discussing a particular client and her behaviours this can also be read as a form of role playing. The client is playing the role of a 1920s woman and Borland is showing a man playing at having woman’s sexual parts. He is having his masculinity hidden behind woman’s sex. It is the woman-Borland- who is hiding the man beneath these signifiers of femaleness. The man is allowing her to hide his masculinity perhaps in order to soften it. He is transformed into a new form of a man through working with the artist.

The inversion of the female body where the slot of the sex, in its outrageous merkin, replaces the face could be read as a reference to Magritte’s *Rape* (1946) without the sinister overtones or a suggestive joke about men only seeing women as sex objects. At the same time, there is a great deal of incongruity about the fact that this is obviously a softly plump man standing quite relaxed in the centre of the frame, wearing outrageously silly



props which allude to the female sex. In this instance we want to look but also feel discomfited by the obvious allusion to the genitals – they are literally in the viewer’s face. There is also reference to the carnival here where masquerades and sexual ambiguity are important factors in liberating the actors, the people, involved in the festival. Anything is possible, roles are reversed, mayhem is obligatory, going too far is never far enough. This also reminds us of the way in which the co-poietic process allows for the elision of the subjects so that they both take on partial subjectivity but also transgress one another’s boundaries to exchange energies, roles, and set borderlinks and traces.

The key to much of this imagery is that Borland is providing a different idea of masculinity or a new way of looking at men - proposing a slightly vulnerable playful aspect. Usually masculinity is defined in terms that stress the power of the male, especially through the penis. Bordo suggests that:

The penis stands not for the superior fitness of the individual male over men, but for generic male superiority – not only over females but also over other species (1999, p. 87).

This “proclaims its kinship with higher values- with the values of civilization rather than nature” (Bordo, 1999, p. 89). Borland is offering another way of seeing the penis as a signifier. She is proposing that the male figure contains a more priapic aspect - one which recalls the ancient Greek rural deities Priapus and Pan. The priapic figure with his oversized penis embodies a wilder, bawdier masculine energy, akin to the association

that women have had traditionally with nature. The body is not the classical body beautiful associated with phallic power but a mundane ordinary male body at play.

The long noses, in these *Smudge* images, working within this more playful realm, are flagrantly penile and also combine with jaunty bodily placements readily associating them with theatrical comic possibilities. The fact that many of the figures allow themselves to be caricatured and revealed in ways that potentially opens them up to derision evidences both recognition of male strength and also trust in the image maker. They work together with the artist and hope to generate a response within the viewer.

Such pictures represent a different view of the male body, which, without denigration, still allows the subject to have his own autonomy and power. It would seem that Borland uses play and humour as both an exploratory method and as an intrinsic element of the process of making images. The process of play feeds into the work and allows her to understand her own psychological state as well as exemplifying sympathy, erotic sensibility and compassionate regard toward the other. The male bodies in these series are never debased. They can be funny but they are in on the joke, not the object of it, as they are complicit with the artist - playing.

## CONCLUSION

The women discussed in this chapter reveal an ongoing interest in the nature of the gaze and the presentation of the male body from a woman's

perspective. The use of humour and/or play to comment on such themes, while often provoking laughter, reveals a serious purpose. Essentially this laughter can provide entrée to uncomfortable truths, perhaps leading us to speculate on them in new or surprising ways. As Chojnowski comments:

To laugh is to see and acknowledge the way things are, whether one wants to or not. Laughter often forces one to see what one, often, does not want to see (Chojnowski, 2000).

Seemingly humour allows us to examine difficult ideas but can soften the sting enough for us to see a way to work on or accommodate those problems. Laughter is particularly effective as a means of establishing a seed and causing us to examine the serious intent beneath the humour. Following on from this, as humour is often idiosyncratic, the way in which each artist treats her subject is also quite diverse. Laughter is used “as a universal philosophical principle that heals and regenerates” as well as a means to challenge authority (Bakhtin, 1965, p. 70; Kent, 1990, p. 56). Laughter provides a means to develop rapport and exchange energies allowing us to come together to resonate with others.

De Genevieve reveals a subtle and articulate presence in her work. Her pictures exemplify an erudite understanding of issues of the day, and clever use of nuanced layers to examine the debate. She is implicit in the background of the work, setting up the performative elements of her pictures, implying presences that only partly emerge into view. Yet these works still generate laughter.

Borland reaches out to her subject and literally gets into the sandpit with them as a fellow player. The borders between looked at and looking out slide together in such an interaction; the playfulness and desire to see and share a ludic aspect of the body, her own and others, show a personal regard and respect for her subject. She works with her model and reaches out to her audience in a co-poietic manner. The humour in this case shows a totally different vision of the male body. Yet within that viewpoint we see the innate beauty and dignity of the male figure, not taking himself too seriously and playing with the artist willingly and openly.

There is also an element of vulnerability in the male bodies in Borland's and De Genevieve's images and it is this aspect which will be the focus of the next chapter in which Borland's series *The Babies* (2001) and De Genevieve's *The Panhandler Project* (2004-2006), will be discussed along with the work of Berlinde de Bruyckere.

## CHAPTER 5: WIT(H)NESSING THE VULNERABLE BODY: HEALING MALE WOUNDS



Figure 52: Guido Reni (1575-1642, St Sebastian, 1601-161, oil on canvas, 170 x 133 cm, Prado Museum, image source Prado website <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/saint-sebastian/d98d334e-a7f4-44eb-9d7c-7cfc689a6d5b>

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity awhile,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 5 scene 2).

### WIT(H)NESSING TRAUMA

In the opening to an unconscious matrixial event -encounter, the artist can't not share with an-other, she can't not witness the other. The *I* and *non-I* are wit(h)nessing one another, and by that they become partialized, vulnerable and fragilized. The artist doesn't build a defence against this fragility but freely embraces it (2005, 704).

Underpinning metramorphic borderlinking is an element of working with or through trauma in a matrixial zone. Ettinger as a practicing psychoanalyst has an interest in the area and as a result has identified that the matrixial sets up an environment where she can work with trauma and in her artwork she does this (as discussed in Chapter 1). She says that

Since *I* cannot fully handle events that profoundly concern me, they fade-in-transformation while my *non-I* becomes wit(h)ness to them. It may happen because of my premature subjectivity or the highly traumatic value of events, *I* cannot psychically handle encounters at all. In the matrixial psychic sphere, my imprints will be transcribed in the Other, and to begin with in the m/Other. Thus my others will process events for me, like my m/Other processed archaic events for my premature and fragile subjectivity (2006, p. 140)

Ettinger is proposing that through metramorphic links one is able to share with others the psychic load that traumas or disturbances might cause. As the matrix is seen as having metaphorical attributes such as carriage, healing and regeneration and works through the creation of interconnected networks there is potential to create conditions that will provide surcease to that trauma. There is an ongoing inscription and transcription of events and encounters transmitted between participants and, in that process, injuries to the psyche may be transformed. This could be seen as a form of energetic or emotional transfer where a compassionate shared exchange occurs and through that reciprocity, or give and take, capacity to deal with wounds is given to the other. Supportive bonds are established where such wounds are repaired.

The term wit(h)ness, as discussed in Chapter 1, is being used to provide a rationale of “witnessing” in terms of how another person might be a spectator to an event as well as take the role of validating that event and the term “with” is used to indicate that they are alongside providing support. With regards to creation of aesthetic objects the concepts of shared trauma and healing wounds can be realized through the



relationship that the artist has with her partial subjects and the resolution of practice to create imagery and or encounters.

In this chapter the focus will be on three women artists who have created renditions or images of the sometimes wounded and vulnerable male body and how this might be read in terms of the matrixial gaze.

### THE VULNERABLE BODY

While the vulnerable body is usually imagined as a female figure there is also a long historical tradition of the suffering, abject and precariously situated male body within religious and mythological iconography; exemplified particularly in both the body of the “sacred victim, Christ crucified” and the figure of St. Sebastian who in particular is frequently portrayed as young, feminized and languidly accepting the “arrows of outrageous fortune” impaling his gorgeous body (Leppert, 1996, p. 115; Shakespeare, *Hamlet*). Consequently vulnerability is often expressed through a figure naked, swooning and open to the gaze.

In the late eighteenth century there was a proliferation of images of this type; as Abigail Solomon-Godeau points out the “ephebic youth [is] poignant, passive, androgynous and more or less feminized” (1997, p. 55) essentially a form of masculinity that serves to stand in for sexual difference without recourse to the female body. She says that the ephebic youth serves to foster the “homosocial, or even homoerotic tenor of the

Neoclassical (elite) culture” (1997, p. 59) whilst excluding women from that milieu. The passive youth is used to express a power differential between that cultural elite and women.

Germaine Greer (2003, p. 213), also discusses at length the vulnerability of the male figure. However, this too largely concerns the generic ephebic<sup>27</sup>, androgynous, youth who is often used as a homoerotic subject or a sexualized feminized one, effectively an excuse for “the depiction of a luscious male nude in a posture of abandonment”. She does, though, through her exploration highlight the fragility of the male body (2003, pp. 195-217).

While the ephebic male body described by Solomon-Godeau and Greer, has been an object of homoerotic desire, depictions of the vulnerable male body by more contemporary female artists reveal a different perspective and response – one which seeks to engage with frailties common to us all but are usually suppressed in traditional Western conceptions of masculinity as manifested through a tough and impenetrable demeanour. As Sarah Kent observes, during the seventies women’s “individual perceptions of husbands, lovers and friends seen as vulnerable, weak, cruel or foolish, punctured the masculine mystique” (1990, p. 8). She also says that women know too much about men and throughout their lives have seen men at “their most vulnerable and inadequate” (1990, p. 66). This suggests that women can sometimes have a nuanced appreciation of the potential for

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<sup>27</sup> A term used to denote a feminized youth, and in classical Greek terms an adolescent boy.

masculine frailty and are able to reveal this when dealing with this aspect of the male body.

Rozsika Parker (1985) discussing the exhibition *Women's Images of Men* (1980) also identifies several key themes associated with women working with the invalided, and vulnerable, male body. First and foremost she suggests that through depictions of the sick or fragile male figure women are able to redress the unequal power relationships experienced between men and women. She says "lying behind all the varied images of the male invalid is the desire to level the power imbalance" (1985, p. 46). By this she is highlighting how women have in general been the subject of male observation and by depicting men as vulnerable or sickly women are able to "place men in the positions usually occupied by women in art- naked and on display"(1985, p. 48).

Parker also suggests that "within fiction the male invalid answered a number of needs. He gave women an excuse to abandon feminine passivity and reticence and take action" (1985, p. 46). This also allows sexual desire to be hidden within the, acceptable, guise of maternal pity (1985, p. 46). The woman is activated and the invalid male is softened and made passive, the male is feminized and through that transformation he is able to understand a woman's position in the world. This is suggesting that the unequal power divisions women experience can be reduced through the male being unwell and through her being able to minister to him safely whilst he is under her aegis. The focus here is on the exchange of power from one person to another and requires either the diminution of strength

in the male or the acquisition of it in the woman. Whilst power is levelled there is still emphasis on the strength of one versus the loss or reduction of it in the other.

Robert Bly uses the term 'wound' throughout his book *Iron John: A book about Men* (1990) where he suggests that in order to become a fully resolved man one must allow oneself to be wounded, or allow oneself to be vulnerable. Hence the meaning of vulnerability is explained through the concept of the wound. This wound permits self-awareness and understanding which lets the man live a full, rich life. He says:

To feel the wound in a particular part of the body gives the wound weight, and to understand it as a part of an ancient story gives it weight. Without the weight given by a wound consciously realized, the man will lead a provisional life (1990, p. 45).

In other words the wound acts as a conduit or entry point for a variety of influences, feelings and essences from the world to act on the male.

This recognizes that, potentially, the adult figure has similar vulnerabilities to the child that might not focus specifically on the vulnerability of the body but perhaps is more to do with the psyche. Bly sees this opening and acceptance of one's vulnerability by men as a positive, healthy position, writing that:

We are living in an important and fruitful moment now for it is clear to men that the images of adult manhood given by the popular culture are worn out; a man can no longer depend on them. By the time a man is thirty-five he knows that the images of the right man, the tough man, the true man which

he received in high school do not work in life. Such a man is open to visions of what a man is or could be (Bly, 1990, preface).

Although Bly says that men need each other to develop ideas about manhood he also notes that women often play a part in this search for an authentic male identity. The women in this chapter reveal vulnerability in the male figure by portraying intimate and sometimes difficult aspects of human behaviour. Polly Borland and Barbara De Genevieve in concert with Berlinde De Bruyckere evidence a strong compassionate interest or concern for such vulnerabilities and show the spectator the male body as neither tough nor traditionally masculine. All three work with adult male bodies without recourse to the depiction of ephebic eroticism that is often associated with male vulnerability. In their various interactions with the male body the three artists demonstrate the use of a matrixial approach to their work and also reveal the creation of metramorphic linkages in the process.

As seen in the previous chapter there is a close alignment between the delight of ludic play and the potential to fall into bathos. Polly Borland examines this possibility to an extent in *Smudge* but more definitively in *The Babies*, where the initial comic possibilities are underpinned by the rather sad and wounded aspects of the “babies”. This series depicts men, and a very few women, who practice infantilism, a form of regression or fetishism where the participants role-play as babies.

According to one adult baby there are at least 500,000 adults worldwide who regularly choose to be involved in role-playing as babies which involves regressing to a range of childhood phases from very young new-born infants through to toddlers. The babies return to the sanctuary of childhood, often one they did not have, to explore unresolved childhood trauma or to allow themselves to throw off the responsibilities of adulthood. (Allen, 2012)

Polly Borland discovered this behaviour in the late 1990s and made overtures to people involved in this secretive world in order to produce portraits of them and attempt to understand them more fully. By extension, she may have also thought she would understand more of her own inner life as something about the babies resonated with her. This interest was the impetus for her series of photographs, *The Babies*.

This suite explores the fetishization<sup>28</sup> of some aspects of early childhood, usually, by men, who take on the accoutrements and behaviours of young children, toddlers or babies, and act out, regress to or re-imagine this aspect of childhood. Not only do the subjects seek to re-establish direct connections to a time when they were absolutely an innocent without adult responsibilities but they can also immerse themselves deeply into a situation or state where they are allowed to literally soil their nappy without social castigation. In this role-play they can be nurtured by a mother or

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<sup>28</sup> Infantilism is the practice of dressing up as a baby for a variety of reasons, which sometimes, but not always, includes seeking sexual gratification; usually men are involved in this practice although a few women also partake.



father figure and return to being a baby, abrogating adult rules of engagement and ‘manly’ behaviours.

Kahn (2002, p. 36), explaining Freud’s work on children and sexuality, says that childhood sexual development includes various stages that begin with an indeterminate polymorphous sexuality that is not focused on the genitals, understood as:

the earliest pleasures of children, which are obtained by them from organs other than genital. By that he meant that every bodily pleasure that will later become the primary choice of adults called perverse is included in the repertory of young children (Kahn, 2002, p. 36).

The babies, through their immersion in this polymorphous state become engaged with all their senses in various ways such as: changing their clothes to the soft silky materials of childhood; the use of the nappy which makes them feel more aware of the nether regions and by direct contact with the floor and each other. Bathing and play are key elements of this role-playing, both of which involve a somatic experience and physical action. Baby Derek (Allen, 2012) maintains that as a baby he mainly likes to have his nappy changed and to be tucked into bed to sleep in the security of his cot. These activities are largely denied the adult man and provide comforting nurturing environments which the adult baby might have not experienced to any degree as a child.

This aspect of sexuality, infantilism, is quite an underground one, yet in their mundane existences the participants might reveal the “terrifying picture”, hiding a truck driver, or a politician (Cave, 2012). The sight of

rotund, nappied men cavorting with their toys and each other is hard to see as attractive or even sexual. They open themselves up to derision. This is where Borland reveals her compassion, humour and capacity to sympathize with her subjects. Her work also exhibits the matrixial gaze through opening up of the self to the trauma of the other. Ettinger says “in the matrixial sphere, what this vulnerability implies is not a sacrifice of myself in a disappearing for the sake of the Other, but rather a partial disappearing to allow jointness” (2006, p. 145). In essence Borland is inviting encounters whilst becoming open to the other person’s vulnerabilities and wounds.

The way in which she involves herself in an intimate, interactive manner suggests that she is able to empathize with and connect to her subjects to such an extent that they reveal themselves to her scrutiny. This opening up by the subject suggests a level of trust between artist and model and as a result reveals a great deal of potential vulnerability on the part of the male figure. This also supports the concept of wit(h)nessing the trauma of another person or people and allows the artist to share and heal the pain experienced by the subjects of her work.

In order to photograph the babies Borland was invited to join them in their play. She effectively becomes part of the experience and a playmate by immersing herself in the situation; re-engaging, remembering and revisiting her own childhood, perhaps seeing herself as the “lonely doll with no-one to play with” (Borland, 2012). Not only does this help her understand and empathize with her fellow ‘babies’ but she also shares the field with them,

in similar fashion to the artists in Chapter 3. This too supports her ability to treat her subject with respect and prevent accusations of objectification of the men she pictures. It also demonstrates the mutual reciprocal arrangements occurring between the partial subjects – artist and babies – and the growth of metamorphic linkages and bonds.

The photographer is often seen as a documenter of reality, authenticating and reinforcing a particular object or the veracity of an image. In this situation the positions of viewed, viewer, photographic operator and participant are elided – she is with them, yet still behind the camera as a documenter, which questions and reveals not only the nature of the pictorial subject but unveils aspects of Borland's own persona and her role in the situation. It is quite clear that she is aware of the sensitivities of the babies, as she carefully orchestrates the way in which she builds the suite. The first photographs reveal very little about the nature of the subjects, being more about the absence of the babies than their realization.

Similarly to Borland's own experience when gradually being invited into and discovering this world, the babies are revealed to the viewer little by little. They gradually grow to trust Borland and in doing so become more relaxed about revealing more of themselves. In the process they create tentative threads and connections between one and other. Borland also shares some of their trauma and effectively helps them by carrying some of that pain on their behalf. In turn, traces of this trauma are passed on to the viewer/s who also share and carry some of it.

Ettinger says that the “new healing potential offered by the idea of wit(h)nessing is ethical, yet profoundly aesthetic, or transferred by aesthetic means”(2006, p. 147). So not only is Borland involved in that ethical aesthetic. We are, as viewers, carried along with it and in that carriage are also bringing understanding into fruition. We jointly enact an aesthetic wit(h)nessing in art that brings trauma into “culture’s surface”(Ettinger, 2006, p. 147). This wit(h)nessing and healing is exemplified in many of the pictures in the *Babies* series.

We are shown a room full of vast oversize silky baby clothes and dresses, a door marked “Baby Doll”, a fleeting glimpse of a pink shiny figure hiding behind a door. Darkly lit, slightly grimy rooms with hard nubbly carpet act as a nursery for the babies who play hide and seek with the camera and Borland. They are being cagey about who they allow into the confines of their strange alternative life revealing brief clues and fragments of themselves to the viewer, although, over time Borland suspected that “They liked me. I think the whole thing of the camera looking at them felt like a very intense gaze, a bit like a mother's gaze (Bunbury in conversation with Borland, Nov 21, 2002).

This gradual reveal demonstrates how the men involved are both extremely careful about exposing themselves as babies, and, conversely, their attendant need to be seen, loved and validated by others. As the scene unfolds, a little more of the babies are shown - a glancing fragment of a huge man-sized leg with girly socks, a piece of a dress, a man’s back.

Gradually we are given entrée to a fuller picture which reveals more and more detail about playtime and the playmates, more about their bodies. This culminates with a series of naked male figures immersed in their various baby iterations, which aligns with the way in which the babies grow to gradually trust Borland, revealing more and more about their baby-world to her all the while co-emerging into prominence. In this regard she is recognizing their innate vulnerability and validating them and by doing this she empowers them.



Figure 53: (clockwise from top left) Polly Borland, *Mummy Hazel's Nursery* Kent England, 2001, and *Party at Mummy Hazel's*, 2001, *Mummy Hazel's Biannual Party*, 2001, images source Sontag, S. 2001, Polly Borland: *The Babies*, Powerhouse Books NY

Of the babies Borland states:

When I first heard about the adult babies I thought it was comical. Then I saw it, my feeling was this kind of sad [sic], but it also had all these other

elements there were layers to it. Visually it was unbelievable. There were giant babies crawling around the room, so it had a pantomime quality, there was a psychological pathos as well as seediness. I've never said this, not publicly, but at some level there was identification because I thought I'd still like to be a baby. I found it thrilling (2012, p. 24).

This ambivalence, and shared identification, is enacted in several of the baby works including *Julianne at Mummy Hazel's* (2001) (Figure 54) that depicts the male body as the antithesis of the body beautiful. A vast, nearly abstract, bottom, possibly marked by the “potty” or his disposable nappy, takes up the whole frame of the picture so that the viewer is forced to look carefully. As Borland suggests, there is a brief moment of humour when the image is first seen almost immediately followed by the revelation of a sense of vulnerability. Poking, or mooning, one's rear end at another is often seen as provocative or funny, and in this case it is, but simultaneously the tenderness of the behind and the oddly trusting stance is quite innocent. Humour tempered by compassion on the part of the artist emerges from this strange conjunction. The baby is showing himself to her and to us and is opening and revealing his tenderness to all. We are being given something fragile and hopefully will carry it carefully.





Figure 54: Polly Borland, The Babies series, *Julianne at Mummy Hazel's*, 2001, type c photograph, 121 x 182 cm, image source Sontag, S. (2001), Polly Borland: The Babies, Powerhouse Books, NY

Although we do not see the penis we do have a glimpse of the incongruous scrotum, barely seen behind the clenched buttocks of the baby. This highlights the opened up nature of the figure, which makes him extremely vulnerable to hostility or mirth. Yet the artist, although seeing the humour, also exposes the humanity of the subject, especially as the bottom is common to both women and men. One of the babies in an interview says that Polly gave him, and his fellow infantilists, a great deal of respect and dignified their common peccadillo, helping them understand who they are. (*Polymorphous*, 2012).

*Julianne at Mummy Hazel's* uses velvety, darkly theatrical framing to push the bottom forward, and the low focal point emerging up from the ground appears to make the figure topple or dive. The cruciform shadows at the low central point draw the eye into that scrotal sac and suggest the nervously contracted bottom cheeks might be the result of a very fragile human being revealing all to the viewer.

The line between play and abjection is very close in this suite of images. Borland is both describing play, involved in it and then extending beyond that idea, to the moving vulnerability, yet exciting oddness of the men she depicts. As noted, she finds it a fascinating, subversively thrilling subject.

*Violet Blue at Tommy's House* and *Julianne in bath at Mummy Hazel's*, (Figures 55 and 56) exemplify her tenderness and sensitivity to both the ludic and lonely isolation of these men. In the former picture she hides the sex of the<sup>29</sup> male figure whilst highlighting it through the use of the white nappy as a central focus. Violet Blue is putting on a sulk, which potentially provokes amusement in the viewer as the expression is an assumed play-acting one. However, in contrast to this moment of dramatic theatre, the placement of his body in space suggests something quite the opposite of it being a jest. Play is used to focus on his isolation as the cold greyish background and cropping removes him from his fellows. The pretence of fierce babyish sulkiness is in reality some indication of his social alienation.

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<sup>29</sup> The facial coarseness makes him obviously an adult male



Figure 55: Polly Borland, The Babies series, *Violet Blue at Tommy's House*, 2001, type C  
photograph 186.00 x 121.00 cm, image source Polly Borland: The Babies, Powerhouse Books, NY



Figure 56: Polly Borland, The Babies series, *Julianne in bath at Mummy Hazel's*, 2001, type C photograph 121.00 x 180.0 cm, image source Sontag, S. (2001), Polly Borland: The Babies, Powerhouse Books, NY.

Similarly *Julianne in bath at Mummy Hazel's*, uses theatrical setting to encircle Julianne with seedy nylon shower curtains. Ostensibly the naked man is intently playing in the bath<sup>30</sup>; a happy situation full of childhood resonances; a frothy bubble bath, toys, warmth, a soft towel waiting, and solitary play whilst 'mummy' keeps an eye on him. Once again there is quite a distinct misalignment between the obvious overtones of a blissful playtime in the bath and the sense of dark, almost secretive loneliness of the single figure in the water. Baby Caffy (Allen, 2012), in interview said

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<sup>30</sup> "The babies like to roll on the floor, play with their bears and have their tummies tickled. Cathy is sucking a dummy but, of course, she likes mummy Linda's breast best. Darren definitely needs his nappy changed; let's get that wet one off right now. But look what Julianne is getting up to in the bath! She's shaving her penis!" Stephanie Bunbury, Nov 21, 2002



that at first he and his fellow babies were not happy to be photographed in full frontal or nude poses, and this image of the turned away self-contained figure perhaps supports this shying away from being revealed to the public eye; yet, there is also an acceptance that the viewer or more importantly the photographer is looking.

The spectator looming over the baby is witness to “something no one else has seen” whilst being drawn into the scene through the dramatic lighting, especially along the bath, and central position of the body (Cave, 2012).

Given the current societal concern over child pornography the viewer is placed in an uncomfortable position of seeing, putatively, a baby in the bath, whilst being tragically aware that it is an adult male body we are being shown, potentially involved in covert sexual play. Baby Derek says that in fact they are not interested in babies sexually, but in being babies. (Allen, 2012).

The way in which Borland has closely cropped and positioned the figure in this series also often reduces the distance between the viewer and the subject. This draws the spectator and the figure closer together removing barriers between the two so that there is a sense of being part of the action. Peter Weiermair says, of Nan Goldin, that she:

[a]ttempts to eliminate the distance between photographer and subject, between object and voyeur. "My photographs" she says "are derived from relationships and not from observations. In pressing the shutter I do not create distance but instead clarity and emotional contact" (1995, p. 11).

This can legitimately be applied to Borland as well, as she, similarly to Goldin, attempts to build relationships rather than establish any sense of dominance over her subject. She is recognizing the softness of the men she pictures, which is exemplified through the way she highlights their assumed femininity.

One of the critical aspects of this form of regression is that many of the male babies play at being female children and this too is an idiosyncratic aspect of their fetishism. It is possible that the softness of the female child's accoutrements, their feminization and gentleness is a means of attracting both maternal approval and allowing the male baby to be what they consider to be the essential baby. They might consider that the female baby is the epitome of weakness, vulnerability and innocence and seek to tap into that softly compliant state, one which is absolutely opposite to masculinity. The matrixial is sought through regaining connection to the m/Other.

Finally, through this play, no matter how eccentric it is, the body is revealed in its simple ordinariness. Borland is showing us something that we might find difficult to imagine. She is observing and imagining her fellow creatures in what would be usually considered odd situations and creating visions which reveal the male figure as soft and vulnerable. Her compassionate and non-judgemental involvement in the babies' lives has also perhaps given them both the motherly gaze they seek and the acceptance they need as well as revealing a form of looking that does not objectify the male figure.



Quite similarly Barbara De Genevieve (2006, p. 8) takes the risky path of analysing a cohort of men who are generally viewed as vulnerable to exploitation and who are not seen in terms of sexual allure. She deliberately challenges “the politically correct world [which] requires a certain guardianship of the disenfranchised, among the “less-abled” groups”, and asks the question “So how are street people (the “homeless”) to be represented?”. Where the babies are largely covert in their fetishism, and hidden, the Afro-American men De Genevieve pictures are rendered equally socially invisible through their situation as poor, homeless and marginalized.

#### BARBARA DE GENEVIEVE; THE PANHANDLER SERIES

The non-white body has generated persistent and recurrent interest in the context of Western culture, where “race, sexuality, the uses and abuses of colonial power, the relation of author to the authored” are seminal (Ballerini, 1993, p. 147). In *The Panhandler Project* (2004-2006) Barbara De Genevieve plays with these contentious ideas through an exploration of the African-American male figure as the subject of her researches.

There are several key themes in the *Panhandler* series including; the exploration of the vulnerable homeless man and Western cultural fascination with the exotic other. This latter point is, in a sense, full of ambiguity as the men in this series are exotic in terms of being culturally marginal to the dominant culture. This idea is not so much about themes associated with primitive man or the noble savage but leans towards the

divide between a financially secure white American society and the homeless, impoverished Black men who live in the margins of that middle class environment.

De Genevieve is seeking to elevate these men from their usual disempowered and disadvantaged role, begging in the street, endowing them with a bold, new and subversive status as paid models and collaborators.

The Panhandler Project is intended to engage the viewer in questioning notions of exploitation, objectification and agency as well as (perhaps) more arguable issues that arise in regard to race, class and the sexualization of men who are rarely, if ever, seen as sexual objects. I'm interested in the transparency and questioning of my own attitudes and motives in doing this project as I am attempting to deconstruct the "politically correct" arguments in academia that circumscribe discussions of who can or cannot be the subject/object of the camera (2006).

In a similar manner to Polly Borland, De Genevieve also works closely with her subjects, sharing the space with them during the process of making the image. She asked five homeless men whom she met begging, panhandling, on the streets of Chicago, if they, individually, would pose naked for her in exchange for \$100, a couple of meals, a night in a hotel and a lift back to where she found them. She photographed them in the hotel room either on a bed or seated, initially partially naked and gradually fully bare. This project resulted in a series of pictures of the naked men in various supine, prone or upright poses usually with an element of sensuality and sometimes sexual arousal. Additionally a video was produced which reveals the process behind the image making. This provides a fuller picture

of her empathetic, intimate relationship and interactions with the models and also complements the still photographs by suggesting that both forms of image making work closely together to produce a body of work as well as in the development of contextual background material.

These works deal with the idea of objectification and commoditization of the body and question the exploitation of a “cultural group [De Genevieve] doesn’t belong to” (De Genevieve, video, 2011). She speaks of difference, the exotic other and the cultural divide between the moneyed classes and the ones without. She is observing and dealing with the ethical dilemmas associated with the free market economy, where one can buy anything, including another human being, for the night; the sexualisation of a very particular poverty stricken demographic that is “rarely seen this way” and the exploitation of homeless and vulnerable men by a broader society.

There is also something here that references, and critiques, the American history of Black slavery. The purchase and ownership of another human being is alluded to through the brief hiring or ownership of the panhandlers. Even the preparation of their bodies to be photographed refers to the manner in which slaves were prepared for display and sale; where they were stripped, washed and oiled up to appear strong, healthy and attractive to the buyer (Bordo, 1999, p. 209). The panhandlers are placed into a similar position where they strip, wash and moisturize to be displayed for visual consumption. De Genevieve not only criticizes this historical trope but also makes comment on the way in which:

American academic art culture [has] embraced the less fortunate and sought, in its usual illusory fashion, to protect those it believes are unable to do so for themselves. It was, and still is, an empty embrace with no real concrete protection, only linguistic and representational rules intended to feign respect. Rather than make any actual change, there is only a correct way to speak and make pictures of non-Caucasians. (2006, p. 8)

In other words she challenges particular academic paternalistic patterns of behaviour that ignore the reality of the people behind their well-meaning ministrations.

There is a fine line between commenting on and being part of an exploitative class, the space where “collaboration and exploitation” meet and elide. In this situation – one where the artist is paying vulnerable men to strip and reveal themselves to her for money - this distinction seems to be quite blurred (Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago, 2015). However, the video of De Genevieve directing the men reveals a level of empathy and natural humour between the artist and models <sup>31</sup> which shows she is:

much more interested in the conversation/debate/argument that the two forms of visual representation have the potential to create (Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago, 2015).

This video (De Genevieve, 2011, <https://vimeo.com/29540736>) is critical in providing understanding and clarity about the real point of the project by revealing how De Genevieve collaborates and works with her subjects, at times directing them to move a leg or thrust the head forward or busily patting moisturizer onto an elbow or back to smooth and polish the skin.

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<sup>31</sup> She is both aware of their plight and also genuinely empathetic to them as follows

All the while the naked man is oddly posed, not quite nervous but with a vaguely defiant air as much as possible when one is unclothed - at a disadvantage - and the other two people in the room are clothed. She talks with the men, describing why she is doing what she is doing, the nature of her project and her interests. They laugh together and although the atmosphere seems quite relaxed there is also a feeling of hidden anxiety that sometimes emerges in the photographs. However, throughout the process of making the work De Genevieve is with the men, she is intimately involved and open to them, and they appear to trust and work with her within the close, hospitable environment of the hotel room. There is a strong sense of carriage and nurturance as well as compassionate hospitality in the situation in the sense that De Genevieve encourages the making and provides warmth and care to her subjects.

Wit(h)nessing is sometimes a fraught and risky process which requires openness and effort from both parties. It takes energy to build and sustain compassion and trust as is evident when working with Gordon (Figure 57). His anxiety is exemplified by the way in which he tends, initially, to lunge about excitedly in the video, waving his arms and striding about as he argues with De Genevieve. He exudes an aura of competent physical capacity but also reveals something of his tiredness and fragility when he slumps back on the bed, a naked Afro-American man with two clothed women and their cameras. De Genevieve works with him to create an image which both reveals his fragility but also shows sensuality not normally associated with homeless men.



Figure 57: Barbara De Genevieve, *The Panhandler Project*, *Gordon # 2* and *Gordon #6*, 2004, inkjet print 30.48 x 36.51 cm, images source Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College

This is more obviously stated in the two quite radically different photos of Michael Stewart - another of the models- which demonstrates the dual nature of these works. In *Mike #5* (2005) (Figure 58) he is placed in the centre of the image and framed by a rose coloured bed-head so that he is the focus of the gaze. This image was produced after she asked Michael, a rather stern, vaguely dignified gentleman, “Are you up for an erection?” and on his assent organizes an adult movie for him. Behind the photographer a pornographic movie runs whilst she photographs her model.

His expression is almost unreadable, challenging, quite sad perhaps, gentle or disinterested, and belied by his erect penis. This changes the penis from being an appendage to something that signifies a form of beautiful male power and strength. Bordo says that to “be a phallus, reverence of the erect penis (or its analogue) is required” (1999, p. 87). In this image the placement of the man’s body, the sumptuous setting and the established presence and dignity of the male figure in the centre of De Genevieve’s



focus suggests his penis serves as an additional means of re-establishing a level of personal agency within a potentially vulnerable situation. He returns the gaze directly back at the artist-viewer, quite sadly perhaps, yet this negates the sense of vulnerability and power imbalance established through his nakedness and the photographer's clothed state. The combination of look and erect penis returns the locus of control and autonomy back to the model even though it is through the agency of the artist that this is delivered.



Figure 58: Barbara de Genevieve, *Mike #5*, 2005, inkjet print 30.48 x 36.51 cm, image source Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College

The second photo (Figure 59), conversely, depicts a softer version of the same man. Reclining after the fashion of Manet's *Olympia* (1863) the male figure, unlike the woman in Manet's work, turns away from the viewer lost in his own reverie or perhaps merely tired of the situation.



Figure 59: Barbara de Genevieve, *Mike #6*, 2005, inkjet print 30.48 x 36.51 cm, image source Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College

This suggests that the look in the first image, which is more in keeping with *Olympia*, has been exchanged for a denial of the gaze in the second. Structurally the diagonal position of the body and the lyricism of the pose produces an atmosphere of quiet passivity. The energy in *Mike #6*, (2005)

(Figure 59) exemplified by the longitudinal bodily placement and the crisp framing of the pillow, has been diffused so that we are given the implication of post coital release.

In both pictures the warm colour range and the nature of the fabric also work together to promote an atmosphere of sensuality and sexual play; where the red, pink and skin tones highlight the mahogany colour of the man enveloped by the cushions and bedding. The colour and light also suggests nurturing. The chill of the streets is taken away while he is supported in the comforting atmosphere of the room. The folds of the sensual fabrics suggest body creases and the association of the fold, in that particular colour range especially, with female sexual attributes.

In contrast, *Leon #2* (2004) (Figure 60) depicts a thin, wiry man draped across a white-sheeted bed. The curling wisp of smoke from his nostrils, combined with his partly closed eyes, provides a deliberately staged element of implied menace. Yet, on closer inspection he has bruised, possibly needle marked, thighs suggesting that he is probably unhealthy and thin from malnourishment and may have a drug habit. De Genevieve is taking a huge risk in this set up image where she highlights the gulf between the man's usual situation and well set up hotel room.



Figure 60: Barbara de Genevieve, *Leon # 2*, 2004, inkjet print, 30.48 x 36.51 cm, image source Museum of Contemporary Photography, Columbia College

Although not all of the works in this series are examined here they all contain similar themes which use the disenfranchisement and marginalized state of homeless, and potentially vulnerable, men to bring critical ideas into view. This examination focuses on a class differential between white middle class America and Afro-American culture that highlights the divergence between the privileged and less fortunate. By employing semi pornographic imagery in association with the homeless men De Genevieve pushes at the conventional idea that such a cohort are not usually viewed as sexual beings. These images establish both the visual strength of such a figure whilst reminding us of their inherent fragility and vulnerability. The



dissonance between the model's poverty and homelessness and the sexualisation of their bodies is also critical. As noted, De Genevieve comments on the fact that these impoverished men are not usually perceived as sexual beings. Moreover as soon as the modelling session and night in a hotel is over they are back on the street.

The other facet of this *Panhandler Project* is that it demonstrates the way in which the female artist and the male subject exchange energy and work fluidly with one another. De Genevieve asserts that both the video and the images are integral to the series and that the exchanges during the making of the video are crucial to the creation of the photographic images. This elision and blurring of the roles of watcher and watched suggests that the whole process is one which removes such distinctions and certainly indicates that the relationship is one which returns agency to the men she pictures.

Do I have the power because I have the money to pay them, or do they have the power because without them I have no project? (2013  
<http://hyperallergic.com/143339/thoughts-on-the-life-and-art-of-barbara-degenevieve/>).

This suite of pictures exemplifies the often risky nature of making what Ettinger would call ethical aesthetical works. She observes that the act of wit(h)nessing risks pain through “joining with-in the other’s trauma” (2006, p. 147). Although there is support and an artistic liaison being offered by the artist there is always potential to become involved in “dangerous encounters” (2006, p. 147). There is also the complex inner workings of

both the artist and her partial subject and Ettinger recognizes that there is not always a quiet or gentle resolution to the encounters that take place.

She says in full:

The desire to join-in-difference and differentiating-in-co-emerging with the Other does not promise peace and harmony because joining is first of all joining with-in the other's trauma that echoes back to my archaic traumas: joining the other matrixially is always joining the m/Other and risking mental fragmentation and vulnerability (2006, p. 147).

De Genevieve has dared to embark on the encounter and through her practice allowed herself to be open to her models. She has also shown, through questioning the nature of the homeless men's situation and deliberately using stereotypical imagery, that she understands that she is going to draw criticism. She is in fact with them and witnessing and sharing their situation, wit(h)nessing their trauma.

Finally, she might also be suggesting that we are all in this world together and only the trappings of wealth and social context separate us – perhaps the naked poor look the same as the naked rich. This idea is developed even further by the sculptor Berlinde De Bruyckere in the series *We are All Flesh*, and the large work *Kreupelhout – Cripplewood*. (2009-2013).

#### BERLINDE DE BRUYCKERE, *WE ARE ALL FLESH*

Berlinde De Bruyckere, in common with Borland and De Genevieve, has a long-term interest in the vulnerable and fragile nature of the human body.

Where Borland and De Genevieve have specific individuals or groups under



scrutiny in their images, De Bruyckere often removes the specifics and deals with the abstracted and universal theme of the vulnerability of man<sup>32</sup>. As noted, both Borland and De Genevieve employ an intimate, interactive making process and De Bruyckere also, through the nature of the sculptural format, produces work that suggests an intimate, tactile and haptic approach to working with the figure. In the sculptural series *We are All Flesh* (2009-2013) she often uses wax and tinctures to depict the body as having a friable skin or carcase that allows the viewer to peer inside and permits exit and entry to the world at large.

*We are All Flesh* has had a gradual, iterative, growth that not only offers up figuration focused on the human form but also employs other animals and life forms such as horses or deer and even trees to signify the body. This plays on the idea that all animals and beings have the same structure; under the skin the musculoskeletal infrastructure of the body is essentially the same, even a tree has veins and limbs, dendrites and connections similar to man; hence the title: *We are All Flesh*.

In the work *We are All Flesh Luca Giordano* she is using these strategies to respond to *The Martyrdom of St Bartholomew* (1660) and *Prometheus Bound* (1666) by Luca Giordano.

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<sup>32</sup> Even though *Kreupelbout – Cripplewood* is about St Sebastian, Venice and the Black Death and as such could still be seen as an abstraction



Figure 61: Berlinde De Bruyckere, 2009, *We are All Flesh Luca Giordano* wood, wax, polyester, steel, 105 x 110 x 203 cm with *The Martyrdom of St Bartholomew* in the background, image source Hauser & Wirth, image credit Mike Bruce



Figure 62: Berlinde De Bruyckere, 2009, *We are All Flesh Luca Giordano*, wood, wax, polyester, steel 105 x 110 x 203 cm, image source Hauser & Wirth, London, image credit Mike Bruce.

Bousset notes that “She empties the bodies: [and] through the holes the spectator sees the dark interior, at once repulsive and alluring” (2013, back cover) which in turn shows the body as pitiable, permeable and perhaps in need of healing. She offers the spectator, and the world, entry whilst simultaneously stitching the rent flesh to repair the wounds. She says that this is a way of “forcing back the soul” (2013, p. 49). There is a constant interplay between the fearful need to protect the self or the body from being wounded and the requisite need to open and allow the world in to mend the scars. This dichotomy is expressed in the way in which the skin or body is exposed, peeled back, penetrated and restitched in several of the *We are All Flesh* sculptures. This interest in the vulnerability of the body exposes the

provisional nature of corporeality, the inevitability of pain and loss as well as redemption and highlights our commonality with other creatures.

The original paintings, *The Martyrdom of St Bartholomew* (c.1660) and *Prometheus Bound* (1666), use the male body as a means to reveal the fulsome naked figure in physical throes of torment, possibly in terms of sado-masochistic eroticism, De Bruyckere responds to them as pitiable and sack-like and not deliberately eroticized. In the paintings the body is arrayed quite decorously whereas the sculpture has the feeling of the body collapsing under the strain of a wrestling hold; and the skin barely holds together as it drops and heaves on the floor. These bodies fall away into space and move.<sup>33</sup> This dual body is metamorphosing as we look at it, transforming into a new form – a new body. There is a sense of struggling and heaviness combined with a suggestion of masculine erotic play, especially as the bodies are joined together. The meanings are constantly evolving on each viewing which is what De Bruyckere hopes will happen. She says that she wants the spectator to see new things, build new connections as they go further inside the layers of the sculpture.

*We are all Flesh Luca Giordano* is also reminiscent of other paintings such as Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Hercules and Antaeus*, (approximately 1530) (Figure 63) where the flat perspective and gyrating action of the men within the painting are transformed to generate two figures in the round.

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<sup>33</sup> Antaeus is reputed to have been unbeatable if he had contact with the ground and would regenerate and repair if he touched it.



Figure 63; Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Hercules and Antaeus*, approximately 1530, oil on board, 26.5 x 17.5cm, collection of Compton Verney, England, image source BBC Art, Public Catalogue Foundation

The original painting appears as two joined figures, almost Siamese twins, depicting the mythological hero Hercules fighting with Antaeus<sup>34</sup>. As Antaeus regenerates and reforms and then finally succumbs to Hercules' bear hug, he dies, is absorbed and is forever changed into some other being. This bears a resemblance to the two figures in De Bruyckere's sculpture where the two men wrestle and writhe as one. De Bruyckere also speaks of her interest in transformation and change, seeing the body as

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<sup>34</sup>The mythological figure Antaeus was reputed to fight all comers so he could use their skulls to build a temple, Hercules/Herakles-as Antaeus was unsurmountable if he touched the ground- lifted him in a wrestling hold and crushed him in a bear hug.

something that seems to pulse and grow, fall away and revive, transform into a new creature. The Giordano painting is also transformed by the way in which the sculpture responds to it, so that both the painting and the sculpture take on new lives. We see the paintings differently through the fleshy works. The three paintings and the sculpture keep playing off alongside one another. We are also being exposed to the durational aspect of these works through the reference to the historical paintings and the mythology, and involved in the timeless fascination that such linkages can bring into fruition.

While Alexandra Coghlan describes De Bruyckere's works as both 'uncanny' and 'monstrous' De Bruyckere is in reality transforming the figure from one that is usually viewed with repugnance to one that engenders compassion and understanding. She highlights the richness of the form through situating these artefacts within the context of a medieval tradition of using the grotesque figure as a means of expressing the porous borders "between art and life":

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed complete unit; it is unfinished, it outgroups itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world (Bakhtin, 1968, p. 26).

The bodies that De Bruyckere unfolds use some aspects of this convention by using skin which tears and cavities to reveal the inner caverns of the body. She says that this is a way of "forcing back the soul" (2013, p. 49).



Essentially the grotesque embraces all of the incursions of life and the precursor to that penetration is allowing the body to open and be vulnerable. The vulnerable body is not so much monstrous or even grotesque, as Coghlan uses the term, but sometimes fearful, wounded and in need of repair. This can only happen if access to external agency is granted. So there is a constant interplay between the fearful need to protect the self or the body from being wounded and the requisite need to open and allow the world in to mend the scars.

Significantly, most, if not all, of these works in the series are headless and or faceless and this causes a form of rupture in the gaze both for the body and the viewer. The twisted, attenuated bodies lead the spectator around the figure and through the penetrated surfaces, but there is no face or head. Consequently, the gaze is effectively blocked or frustrated.

The idea of metamorphic transformation and the theme of wit(h)nessing comes into fruition in *We are All Flesh Luca Giordano* through the replenishment of the figure. In order to be filled with new life the body must exchange energies willingly. In De Bruyckere's sculpture, the spectator, the artist and the figure are all part of this interaction where the spectator fills the body with their reading/s and the body gives up its inner life to the spectator. The spectator and artist are both wit(h)nessing the encounter. Simultaneously, De Bruyckere stitches up the wounds on the body holding those energies, or the soul inside, and fills the body with new life. This is in accord with Vigneault's suggestion that:

The metramorphic process presupposes no center; any provisional center continuously slips to the borderline margins. Through this process, borders are continuously transgressed or dissolved, thus permitting space for the creation of new forms of connection (2009, p. 36).

This matrixial, metramorphic flow does not privilege one player or participant in the exchange over another. In fact, the spectator needs to be equally open, and vulnerable, to the body as the body is to the viewer. As suggested by De Bruyckere this creates multiple exchanges, layers and readings in the works.

It is notable that where the Giordano painting uses homoerotic imagery that displays the male body in a swooning, sexual faint, De Bruyckere enervates and energizes her men through her witnessing and sharing of their struggle and through her populating the bodies with her energy. As a consequence, although there are allusions to the casual almost incidental eroticism of men wrestling they are not specifically made to be homoerotic. The image is linked and through creating novel ideas is transformed into something new.

There are several formal structures and memes at play here: the materiality, vein-like colouration and organic nature of the wax and paint; the interplay between the spectator and the work and the suggestion that these bodies are in the process of transformation - layer upon layer (See Figures 62-63). This is added to by the fact that the author J.M Coetzee has written in parallel with De Bruyckere and responded to her work whilst she has in turn responded to his - she is making new connections with her

“soul mate” [Coetzee] through their curatorial collaboration (2013, p. 32).

They are also working very strongly in a co-poietic manner where they both share in the creation of the artwork whilst retaining their separateness, co-emerging in jointness. De Bruyckere is also passing on her compassion and wit(h)nessing to her colleague J.M Coetzee and we are all as spectators taking some of that with us.

Coetzee states “As we age, every part of the body deteriorates or suffers entropy, down to the very cells” which might be describing her wavering figures and recognizes that it is:

An intriguing idea: to write a novel from the perspective of a man who has died, who knows he has two days before he – that is, his body- caves in and begins to fester and smell, who has nothing more he hopes to achieve in those two days save to live some more, whose every moment is coloured with grief (Coetzee, 2013, p. 41).

Although the writing is not about De Bruyckere’s sculpture it sits alongside it and is partly generated by it. This is an energetic exchange between the two artists, as the works set off feelings and abstractions on the part of the writer and the words impact on the sculptor.

In the spaces of resonance carved out by De Bruyckere writers can practice their crafts of creation, not by writing *about* the objects, but by placing creative texts next to them. The writer does not appropriate any of the artwork's meanings by explaining it, but rather adds significance by answering with art (Bousset, 2013, back cover).

As a consequence, through these emptied writhing bodies new interactions are made, ones that offer “the viewer/reader a new way of observing art, as an empathetic experience” (Vigneault, 2009, p. 13). There is also a sense

that the figures co-emerge and co-fade, both as a single artefact and in concert with the paintings and the Coetzee writings. Various facets of the interlinked artworks rise to the surface briefly, garner attention or prominence and then fade away. Through our sharing and wit(h)nessing of the pain and empathizing with the subject we transform their traumas.

De Bruyckere's concern with the vulnerable aspect of the body is also clearly articulated through several works which incorporate cushions or blankets in association with the figure: *Quan*; *the Pillow*; *the Wound* and *Lange Enzeeme Man*<sup>35</sup>. All feature the body in quite tender or vulnerable positions supported or embraced by cushioning and all employ similar sculptural and to an extent painterly strategies by combining bruised-looking, skin-coloured wax, paint and fabrics which work together to reveal the fragility of the body through partly collapsing it into abstraction, whilst sustaining a semblance of the human form or essence. Notably these figures also have no head or face and as such this dislocates any sense of a gaze from the figure, suggesting that they are without agency.

Conceptually these pieces reference the "sacred victim, Christ" and more recently, in terms of remembered history, the naked stacked, folded grey bodies of Auschwitz-Birkenau victims discovered after World War II, piled on top of one another and gradually sinking into sack-like layers of putrefying flesh (Figure 64). *Quan* (2009-10) (Figure 65) buries a male figure into a large misshapen cushion which seems to transform into a mattress as it embraces it.

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<sup>35</sup>There are many more works that use similar strategies, using soft blankets, cushioning or pillows in association with the male figure. There are also several which use blankets as a means of softly nurturing or coddling trees.



Figure 64 Mass grave for typhus victims at Bergen Belsen May 1st 1945, image source Yad Vashem photo archive

This body is settled in a childlike pose that highlights its pitiable, naked vulnerability. The pillow provides comfort and solace, through its softness and acceptance of the clinging man. Yet the dissonance between an adult male figure in the position of a child also encourages the spectator to recognize his painful state and respond to his sadness. He has been swept back, regressed, to childhood and its confusions and losses. We are exposed to his trauma and help to carry it.





Figure 65: Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Quan*, 2009-2010, wax, epoxy, iron, cushion, 50 x 165 x 80 cm, image source Hauser & Wirth, image credit Mirjam Devriendt

The body itself is not idealized, having the folds and incursions of an ordinary older man, his soft belly creased into the bed. The cushion, too, is faded, lumpen and slightly stained, offering the barest comfort to the clinging creature, and also highlighting the impoverished condition of his painful situation. This might be a fitfully sleeping or even a dead man, with coldly coloured, bluish waxy skin and smothered head. His nakedness reveals the full extent of his abjection. This is nakedness without artifice, hiding nothing and opening him up to the gaze, especially as he, headless and faceless, has no means to return that gaze.

This format can be linked to a European tradition of artisan made wax anatomical models, both the pestilence waxes used to depict diseased

bodies and the waxes used to demonstrate human anatomy (Hilloowala et al. 1995, pp. 15, 71; Poggesi, 2014, pp. 6-25).



Figure 66: Susini and Ferrini, Whole body specimen showing the superficial veins and lymphatic vessels (1770-1775) Metal or wood skeleton, transparent wax, variously coloured waxes and pigments 180x 80 cm, In *Ephemeral Bodies; Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure*,

The organic materiality of the wax translates readily to the body through its fluidity, malleability and capacity to take coloured tinctures and De Bruyckere has taken advantage of these qualities to create skin-like flesh and colouration in this man. The use of the pillowing also refers to these medical waxes, which are usually displayed on a mattress, and often anatomical illustrations from this period<sup>36</sup>, the eighteenth century, frame the anatomical figure with a pillow or cloth. This strategy seeks to provide some softening of the confrontational nature of the works and perhaps to express compassion for the anatomized and penetrated body. It can be seen as a tender gesture of regard.

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<sup>36</sup>Exemplified by William Hunter's engravings depicting William Smellie's dissections

Similarly, the aptly named, *The Wound* (2012) (Figure 67), remarks on the vulnerable nature of the body through the interaction of wax contrasting with a pillow; it is as if the artist is trying to lift the body up out of its pain and support it on a soft base. The body is folded, scarred – wounded in much the same way as *Quan* and *The Pillow* (Figure 68). This introspective curled up body, where “He feels like a crab pulled out of its shell, pink and wounded and obscene” (Coetzee, 2013, p. 46) attempts to shut out the spectator, but in doing so reveals how naked and opened up he truly is. His skin is thinly stretched over his frame and this too encourages our awareness that he is excruciatingly sensitive to being both observed and potentially hurt, as he is all raw skin.

Other works, such as *Long Lonely Man* (Figure 69) and *the Pillow* also use cushioning to underpin the flesh and each of these works formulates the idea that the artist is giving the body some form of comfort and nurturing. De Bruyckere comments on the innate pain filled state of man and attempts to provide sustenance to him. All that these figures have is the dubious safety of a thin pillow or a lumpen mattress and the good will of the sculptor, who is sharing in his pain, softening this hard life.



Figure 67: Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Yara-The Wound*, 2012, wax, epoxy, iron, pillow, wood, 122 x 65 x 65 cm, image source Hauser & Wirth, image credit Mirjam Devriendt.



Figure 68: Berlinde De Bruyckere, *The Pillow*, 2012, image source Arts Victoria, ACCA online education kit



*Long Lonely Man* (Figure 69) also references the anatomical waxes at the Specola <sup>37</sup>(Figure 66) Museum in Florence; through the supine placement of the body; use of tinted wax that has been formed to suggest veins; human skin colouration and the penetration of the body. The body has been stretched and twisted so that it appears to be wrenching away from the gaze, its contorted Mannerist configuration suggesting pain and suffering. To ameliorate this terrible condition a pillow is placed underneath and thinly supports it. Formally, this is a similar strategy as the pillowing of the anatomical waxes.



Figure 69: Berlinde De Bruyckere, *Lange Enzeeme Man* (Long Lonely Man), wax, epoxy, cushion, glass, wood, iron, 104.6 x 184.7 x 62.5 cm, private collection Mona, image Annie Geard

#### KREUPELHOUT–CRIPPLEWOOD

In contrast to the previously discussed works, De Bruyckere's treatment of the well-known figure of St Sebastian tests the idea of a body being present at all. St Sebastian, as an established European painterly trope, is associated with the vulnerability of the male body and is depicted throughout Medieval and Renaissance imagery as an iconic representative

<sup>37</sup> "Peter Leopold of Hapsburg-Lotharian (1747-1792) Grand Duke of Tuscany decided in 1771 to bring together all the "scientific collections from the various galleries in the Grand Duchy [of Tuscany] " to create the Imperial Regio Museo di Fisica e Storia Naturale (the Imperial-Royal Museum for Physics and Natural History, later known as "La Specola, which means observatory in Italian)". Pogessi, von Düring. 2014, p. 6.

of the stoic disavowal of bodily suffering. The form epitomizes male beauty, handsome masculinity and the idealized formal nude. Consequently, when we imagine the representation of St Sebastian we usually see, in our mind's eye, a beautiful muscled youth, swooning and penetrated by arrows, essentially, as Germaine Greer (2003, p. 50) notes, another gorgeous nude male arrayed for the gaze.

De Bruyckere eschews the mimetic or literal representation of the idealized male body in her depiction of St Sebastian, seeking instead to evoke his suffering. *Kreupelhout-Cripplewood*, (Figure 70) produced for the 55<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale exemplifies this exploration, where she uses a dead tree as a metaphor for the body of St Sebastian.

This experimentation allows for a radically different approach to depictions of the body that captures essences or tropes of pain with the corporeal body in absentia. De Bruyckere says that:

the dead tree is used here as a symbol of life. A phallic symbol. An ejaculation. I'm aware of the contradictions in this image, but although the elm is dead; it becomes a body, Saint Sebastian as a subjacent element becomes a phallus (2013, p. 43).





Figure 70: Berlinde De Bruyckere, Kreupelhout-Cripplewood, 2012 – 2013, wax, epoxy, iron, textile, rope, paint, gypsum, roofing, 626 (h) x 1002 x 1686 cm, image credit Mirjam Devriendt

The tree acts as a signifier for the body. De Bruyckere noticed it torn down after a storm and something about its fallen state, the loss of power and its nobility resonated with her. As a consequence, she felt that its fall from grace aligned with human frailty but also forms the basis of an act of dual regeneration; one where the tree decomposes into the ground, releases its seeds and grows anew and the other where it is regenerated in the form of the tree/St Sebastian.



Figure 71: Berlinde De Bruyckere, detail of Kreupelhout-Cripplewood, 2012 – 2013, wax, epoxy, iron, textile, rope, paint, gypsum, roofing, 626 (h) x 1002 x 1686 cm, image credit Mirjam Devriendt

St Sebastian is usually separate from the tree, tied loosely and penetrated in some measure by arrows. The tree is generally used as a framing device and part of the torture. De Bruyckere offers an alternative vision and uses the tree as a transformative medium that absorbs the man; they metamorphose and congeal into one body. The tree is veined like flesh and its limbs, penetrating cushions and blankets, which are a reference to the body of the man and arrows that gently work their way into St Sebastian's skin. This suggests several Greek myths, Baucis and Philemon, Apollo's pursuit of Daphne and her subsequent transformation into a tree, Shakespeare's Caliban's perpetual torment - trapped in a tree bole until released by Prospero. Immediately we are given a series of tropes which

focus on change, metamorphosis and the pain of transformation. The vulnerability of the body at the moment of immanence is the crux of this process. In order to regenerate, the body becomes vulnerable, and in the instant before orgasm the body is open.

The framing and scale of the piece also has an impact on how it is read and how the ongoing creation of connections and exchanges develop. This is exemplified in the way that the gallery walls were rendered to suggest dampness, disease - a metaphor for the Black Death- and the tree within this context is meant to act as an antidote.

Michel Foucault, discussing Deleuze and Guattari, suggests that a body in this state, a body without organs and in this case without much evidence of a body, is one that can:

withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna) which Western thought has long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality. Prefer what is positive, and multiple, difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems (1984, xiii)

This body can form new connections, suggest other things, transform and metamorphose. The St Sebastian embedded in this work is one that has already been changed and is producing a constant flow of reference points. Through the tree's fall and subsequent absorption of the man we are given freedom to people the body with any number of St Sebastians, effectively any image of him we can remember or imagine so that all renditions of him are embedded in the tree.

Foucault (1984, xiii) reads Deleuze and Guattari to mean that in order to be a free being we need to throw off old constraints and social models allowing for new relationships, connections and exchanges. This resonates with Ettinger's theorization of the matrix. *Cripplewood* exemplifies the matrixial borderspace in several ways; through the manner in which the two bodies interact, penetrate one another and amalgamate to create a different creature via the framework of the gallery which is used to derive ideas of the Black Death. Wit(h)nessing occurs especially through the imaginary relationship between the spectator and the work which builds multiple readings and layers and requires the viewer to create conjunctions, meanings and understanding. Specifically the viewer is sharing and carrying the trauma forward and transmuting it into a regenerative process. All of the component parts of *Cripplewood* interact and resonate with one another; the work, its site, the viewer, the artist co-poietically build new connections and a multitude of meanings. Within that schema all are wit(h)nessing and sharing in the trauma and historical continuum of the sculpture and bringing it further forth into culture.

In this case De Bruyckere is creating networks and interactions that continuously come into being outside the sculpture. It is relatively easy to imagine an animal as having a similar musculoskeletal body as a man, but to create the link between a man and a tree takes more thought. On reflection, however, the human body, central nervous system and brain have many similarities; we call the torso a trunk, the arms - limbs, our brain has dendrites and terminations, as does a tree. Our veins course and

branch out to our extremities and a tree has a similar structure and nomenclature. Again, De Bruyckere opens up more layers and builds on the idea that we are all the same, effectively all made of the same materials, carbon-based life forms made of stars and all deserving compassion and attention.

## CONCLUSION

All three artists in this chapter focus on the vulnerability of man and in the course of doing so, paradoxically, ennoble and empower him. The babies and panhandlers actively offer themselves up to the artists and although this offering reveals their wounds, they trust the process. Conversely, the artists are also offering themselves to the people they work with, sharing the traumas and vulnerabilities held by them.

Polly Borland, in observing a cohort of fragile male infantilists provides them with the maternal female gaze they crave by depicting them as people who need understanding and love. Barbara De Genevieve subverts a social paradigm which marginalizes homeless, vulnerable men who are not generally seen in terms other than lack, by depicting them as sexual, powerful people. Finally, Berlinde De Bruyckere reminds us of the often-painful nature of existence through tormented bodies, which are effectively all skin, and without barriers to the world.

Each of the artists undermines the objectifying gaze in a different way.

Borland's babies shyly avoid the gaze, only gradually emerging from their

chrysalis state to carefully return the look, if they look at all; De Genevieve's panhandlers return the gaze, almost defiantly, through her ministrations; and the figures De Bruyckere creates thwart the gaze entirely, promising something as they curl around their own body - naked skin-sacks – but being effectively without a face or head revealing very little of themselves. The wax bodies force the viewer to constantly renegotiate the gaze through this abnegation of the look and the confrontational nature of their traumatized bodies.

Each artist seeks to share and work with the pain, alienation and perhaps existential fears experienced by their subjects through connections and recognition. This exemplifies the wit(h)nessing aspect of the matrixial gaze that seeks to share, carry forward and transform trauma and pain of the subjects in order to heal them. As Vigneault proposes, the matrix is one that:

Offers the viewer/reader a new way of observing art, as an empathetic experience, one which turns away from Freudian and Lacanian notions of disruptive loss and destructive lack (2009, p. 13).

Seminal to the images in this chapter is their association with nakedness, in its raw and non-idealized state, as opposed to the more “sophisticated” connotations of the nude. As Ruth Barcan notes, although both naked and nude are culturally mediated terms, the naked body can be seen to represent “the authentic self” – the raw material of the human form; essentially nakedness reveals the truth of the vulnerable isolation of the



adult babies, the unexpected sexuality of the panhandlers and the raw skin of De Bruyckere's figures.

This rawness is in direct contrast to the Classical figure of the nude male and using Ettinger's concept of metramorphosis the next chapter analyses the way in which the sterility of the Classical body has been revisited, transformed and re-interpreted by contemporary female artists.



Figure 72: Head of Athlete Holding a Strigil (Ephebe Apoxyomenos from Ephesos)

One of the key elements of the matrixial borderspace is the transformative process of metramorphic borderlinking, identified by Bracha Ettinger, which potentially creates new imaginary and psychic connections between participants in an encounter. In this research the encounter is generally an aesthetic one between multiple players – the artist, model or models and audience. This chapter analyses how metramorphosis can be used as a means to transform the classicized, and often idealized body from a trope associated with containment and sterility to one that opens up passageways and linkages that allow for different readings of the male nude, whilst still referencing the original Classical form. As the antithesis of the traumatised body discussed in the previous chapter, the sealed body of

Classicism represents the ultimate challenge for the matrixial gaze which seeks to dismantle the notion of a unified and self-contained subjectivity through metramorphic exchange.

Bracha Ettinger says that beauty is associated with an idealized vision of the soul which has been sourced from a Classical era and, although it originates in association with a masculine godhead, it has been transferred to the human male body. Using Otto Rank as a source (1968, p. 13) she says this set of aspirations in the past:

was ideally embodied in the forms and images of gods. In each period, the idea of the beautiful portrays the idea of the soul and its immortality, a soul “which itself arises from the problem of death” (2006, p. 175)

Beauty in this format and context is linked to death, sterility and limitation, whereas aspects of the matrixial gaze, especially through a metramorphic exchange, offers a means to work past this barrier through the creation of thresholds. Ettinger proposes that in “the matrixial sphere, it is the limit itself that is transformed by events into jointness, turning into a transparent threshold” (2006, p. 178).

Rosemary Betterton, although describing representations of the Virgin Mother, says that the “female body appears as a sealed vessel” (1996, p. 33) and Lynda Nead (1990, p. 328) similarly uses the word “contained” to describe the female nude, but this can also be used to describe the male Classical figure. It is difficult to imagine many of the archaic pristine figures of male athletes as extruding viscera or faeces in their exertions. All that has been excised.

This chapter analyses the way in which three women, Dianora Niccolini, Renee Cox and Harriet Leibowitz, seek to break open the sealed borders of the Classical body to allow more fluid exchanges between viewer and subject.

Considering the difficulties that the idealized male body poses, it is significant that women continue to work with such a figure. This can be seen where Niccolini comments on racial stereotypes, and her photographs reflect a response to the Classical image that references both rural priapic natural forms as well as providing a commentary about the traditional idealized body. She also introduces the black male into the Classical lexicon. As will be discussed she does find, and depict, new elements of the male nude to provide a different viewpoint through her own particular focus and interests.



Renee Cox further develops and evaluates the Classical form, appropriating the trope to comment on a lack of black male imagery in Classical mythology and religious iconography; and in doing so creates a dialogue about both gender roles and racial stereotypes. She is opening up the closed metaphorical and cultural meanings associated with the Classical body. Finally, Harriet Leibowitz portrays the ideal beauty of the Classical figure in order to express “lyricism, dynamic movement and the colors of emotion” by filling the Classical body with internal intellectual and spiritual colour and by so doing strips it of its usual association with authority and power.

Figure 73: Artist Unknown, Kritios Boy, 490-480 BC, marble 120 cm, Acropolis Museum, Athens.

## THE CLASSICAL

The idea of the beautiful, idealized human form, sans unsightly bulges or the dismaying sight of the ravages of age is an intrinsic aspect of our cultural background – whether that manifestation is a smooth, glossy fulsome body or a slim-hipped boyish one of either sex (Figure 73). This Classical body is a mirror for collective Western aspirational ideals of perfect bodily form which, in terms of the male figure, has the Greek notion of the athletic, male body at the peak of physical perfection as its basis. The idealized, masculine, beauty has been carried through into contemporary imagery through ancient sculptural artefacts, popular media

and post-modern appropriation, and is part of our visual repertoire of images depicting the beautiful male body. This is reinforced by an ongoing modern obsession with attaining a beautiful body as expressed through gym and fitness culture that focuses on both female and male bodily perfection. Essentially these Classical forms are embedded within the Western cultural lexicon and can still be found in contemporary imagery and social behaviours. Such images trade on the idea that the natural body, whether it be male or female, needs to be:

understood as raw material in need of purification, "cleaning up" or perfection. Both nature and subjectivity are evacuated from the naked model and s/he is transformed into an idealized object, the nude (Barcan, 2004, p. 32).

Luce Irigaray says that the idealized nude male body is one that references the beauty of the god Apollo who “favours remaining in a beautiful appearance, with an ideal form, at the price of subjecting to the vitality of its energy” (2011, p. 131). In her view such a body is ageless, faceless and frozen into an idealized lifeless individuation; such terms suggest that she feels the beautiful nude male figure is essentially inaccessible, providing us with a paragon of beauty but lacking humanity. This body is invulnerable as well as sterile and pushes the viewer away.

Similarly Adam Nicolson (2014, p. 142) says the heroic Classical figure is also a means to express “the ultimate statement of loneliness, the isolation of the warrior” as well as being without emotions or a sympathetic connectivity. This forms a picture of the Classical idealized form as one of “the undiluted self-expression” of maleness (2014, p. 142). Such a figure is



the embodiment of a Classical Greek masculine ethos that celebrates warrior cultural attributes - killing, love of weaponry, and paradoxically, hair grooming<sup>38</sup>, alongside an “insistent body-focus” (Nicolson, 2014, p. 141). This point accords with Irigaray’s view that there is, essentially, an isolated and isolating sterility in this form.

Much of this implies that the Classical male nude is a cultural avatar which substantiates deeply homosocial values and can be read as the ultimate form of phallic power. If this is the case it is difficult to see how women can engage and work with something that on the surface appears to be so inaccessible to them. Even so some women artists have worked with the Classical male nude towards different ends and I am proposing that they are involved in a form of metramorphic borderlinking which is used to transmute the sterility of the Classical form into something much more accessible and innovative.

## METRAMORPHOSIS

Metamorphosis is a process of inter psychic trans-individual communication and transformation between/with-in several entities in a matrixial borderspace (Ettinger, 1997, p. 634)

As discussed earlier in this chapter the Classical nude body appears to exemplify a closed off, self-contained form of the figure and as a result it is quite difficult to engage with it deeply. Ettinger says that metamorphosis

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<sup>38</sup>Essentially as an extension of a pervasive obsession with perfect beauty which includes curling and styling the hair

occurs through the dissolution of limits where "borderlines and thresholds conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones" (1996, p. 278). It is an energetic creative action which focuses on joining and threading links together to create new traces and lines of communication.

If the purified Classical format of the nude can be viewed as being predominantly concerned with a slick and impermeable surface the process of metramorphosis can provide a means to dissolve that barrier. This can set up living encounters and a renewed form of the nude.

In essence, metramorphosis is about change and transformation, disruption to the existing limits of the body, and the gaze, by creating thresholds and linkages to new associations. In terms of recreating the Classical figure it can mean diffusing the surface of the body to allow entrée to the spectator in some way, changing the meaning of the figure and retuning it to become more nuanced and approachable to the viewer or artistic participant. Metramorphosis creates a threshold which we are able to use as a passageway towards new visions and meanings. As Ettinger says:

Metramorphosis is the process of change in borderlines and thresholds between being and absence, memory and oblivion, I and Non-I, a process of transgression and fading away. The metramorphic conscious has no center, cannot hold a fixed gaze - or if it has a center, constantly slides to the borderline, to the margins. Its gaze escapes the margins and returns to the margins. Through this process the limits, borderlines and thresholds

conceived are continually transgressed or dissolved, thus allowing the creation of new ones. (1996, p. 278)

The three artists in this chapter evidence the processes of metamorphosis and create new borderlinkages to transform the sterility of the Classical figure into one that is both accessible to us and works alongside the usual Classical canon.

Niccolini's work during the 1970s references elements of Classical and Renaissance form, by selecting detailed aspects of the body, in conjunction with natural environments; and highlighting the dissonance between the usual association of men with culture and women with nature. Cooper (2004, p. 106) says that this fragmentation and decapitation also references ruined statuary. In particular Niccolini abstracts the penis<sup>39</sup> in order to explore and subvert the way in which societal taboos prevent its public display except in a fine art context. In doing so she draws on a subterranean current within Classical culture where Bacchanalian figures such as the satyr, sporting exaggeratedly proportioned phalluses<sup>40</sup>, presented a foil to the more ennobled figures of divinity. Although still within a Classical canon, this is the sort of body that plays on the more agricultural aspect of Classical culture, priapic fertility gods or figurines that act as a contrast to the more refined form.

In Classical statuary, as well as red and black figure vases, the penis is represented as a neat, almost childlike, appendage signifying the higher moral state of man. The alternative aspect of the penis in Classical terms is depicted as priapic, oversized and erect to denote man's animal nature and,

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<sup>39</sup>She also creates images of the chest or upper torso, perhaps referencing the stylized cuirass form which particularly abstracts the chest.

<sup>40</sup> In Greek statuary and representation this phallus denotes unruly male power out of control, whereas the smaller petite penis often seen on koroi denotes noble, dignified and virtuous male attributes under control.

according to the Greeks, his lesser self. The compact and refined penis in most sculptures, including koroi and later forms, is quite idealized and essentially sophisticated. This formula renders the penis as a cultural artefact - a phallic symbol - in contrast to the rampant and unruly priapus which readily suggests the base and natural urges of an uncultured person. Niccolini explores some aspects of this convention in an attempt to rearrange the topos from man as a cultural sophisticate to man as a natural creature. She is using a Classical form but not the one we are usually familiar with, and gives us the humorous or darker side of the model. Within this imagery she focuses on the detail of the penis as well as referencing the less obvious aspects of Classical imagery such as the curling acanthus form used on the capital of Corinthian columns. As will be argued she also makes a humorous aside about the ubiquitous fig-leaf used to cover the penis in statuary, effectively lifting the leaf on the concealed male appendage.



Figure 74: Dianora Niccolini, *Untitled* (1975) Barns, (1980)



Figure 75: Dianora Niccolini, *Untitled* (1979), Barns (1980)

*Untitled*, (1975) (Figure 74) and *Untitled*, (1979), (Figure 75) focus on the penis as a means of criticizing prevailing, contemporaneous, proscriptions on full frontal male nudity and the taboo of revealing the penis. In the latter work she deliberately places the figure in a sylvan environment in order to build a link between man and nature. Rather than deploying the whole body in an idyllic setting she crops it out of the frame, hence rendering the body as implicit and leaving it as a hovering presence in the background. This approach pulls the gaze into the centre of the pictorial plane, forcing the eye to focus on the penis nuzzling up against a tree, and then, through the vertical lines of the penis and branch, taking the gaze outside the border of the picture. Niccolini says that “she seduces the viewer to look at naked men” and forces the issue of the public viewing of the penis into the limelight (1974-2009 website, unpaginated). This seduction suggests that



she is playing with a power differential, compelling the spectator to look, leading them into sliding around the image through the leaves, along the tree and then presenting them with a grainy, woody-looking penis. This figure is neither the idealized nor the usual priapic form and as such sits somewhere in the middle ground. It is pictured both as a non-idealized realistic male appendage and, through the use of an unconventional viewing angle, as a portrait. This strategy promotes the penis from its usual hidden and mysterious state into a position of having the undivided attention of the spectator.

The penis and foliage combination in this image also references the fig leaf applied, after the fact, to conceal and simultaneously highlight the genitals on Classical statuary and in some paintings. Symbolically, the fig leaf can be used to represent the biblical figure Adam's first clothing and as such, alludes to man's collective shame and fall from grace (Barcan, 2004, pp. 49, 128). This associates the genitals with self-reproach; the fig leaf is used to cover the pudenda to hide the lapsed and shameful carnality of man. Leo Steinberg supports this view by saying:

Christian teaching makes bodily shame no part of man's pristine nature, but attributes it to the corruption brought on by sin. Where but in ancient art would we have found the pattern of naked perfection untouched by shame, nude bodies untroubled by modesty? (1983, p. 20)

When Niccolini focuses on the unadorned and non-abstracted details of the, usually hidden, male appendage she is lifting up the fig leaf and replacing the absent penis; especially as often, due to the ravages of time,

deliberate coverage, malfeasance or mischance, it is absent from ancient statuary. The ubiquitous fig leaf is also alluded to through the pale trefoil plant which hovers over the dark groin area of the figure and the shadowy reverse triangular shape over that central form also suggests uncovering. She is removing the shameful connotations usually associated with the penis and by so doing is using the process of metamorphosis to transform those negative linkages.

Niccolini is also highlighting and renewing connections between man and nature within this image. The hirsuteness of this body is in contrast to the usual hairless, denatured Classical image which serves to remind us of the association of hair and natural sexuality. We are provided with a non-idealized rendition of the penis in a natural world and another reminder of the wild man inside the body.

*Untitled* (1975) also specifically targets the penis as a cultural anomaly absented from a broader art context. This image literally places the penis in the viewer's face. The camera is situated beneath the groin focusing up at it, which emphasises the genitals and does not allow any alternative viewing stance. Once again cropping compels the spectator to examine the penis closely. Niccolini talks about feeling safe to have a long lingering look at the penis without social or moral castigation; this image encapsulates these ideas. As the penis here is strangely pictured as a portrait, a format usually reserved for the face or the whole body, we are able to view it for its formal and aesthetic qualities divorced from its cultural metaphors.

The enlivened curving phallic form also has a natural vegetative appearance suggestive of a mushroom, again a phallic bio-metaphor, and rendered accessible through its association with nature.

Niccolini's *Untitled* (1975) uses the penis to highlight the absence of full frontal imagery of the penis in a fine art context; it is not so much a sexual fetish, as a subject in its own right. It is seen as a non-idealized unadorned body part. Niccolini also involves the matrix of time and historical precedent, duration, through her reappraisal of the Classical figure. In contrast, Mapplethorpe's *Untitled* (1973) (Figure 76) tightly frames the penis through the confines of a small Polaroid photograph and dark, tight, low slung underpants so that the pale appendage is enhanced by the contrasting background. This does suggest sexual fetishism. The Mapplethorpe Polaroid image needs to be read in context as it is one of several similar photographs made throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, including *Self Portrait*, (1973), *Patrice* (1977) and *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980-81) all of which demonstrate Mapplethorpe's focus on sexualized imagery.

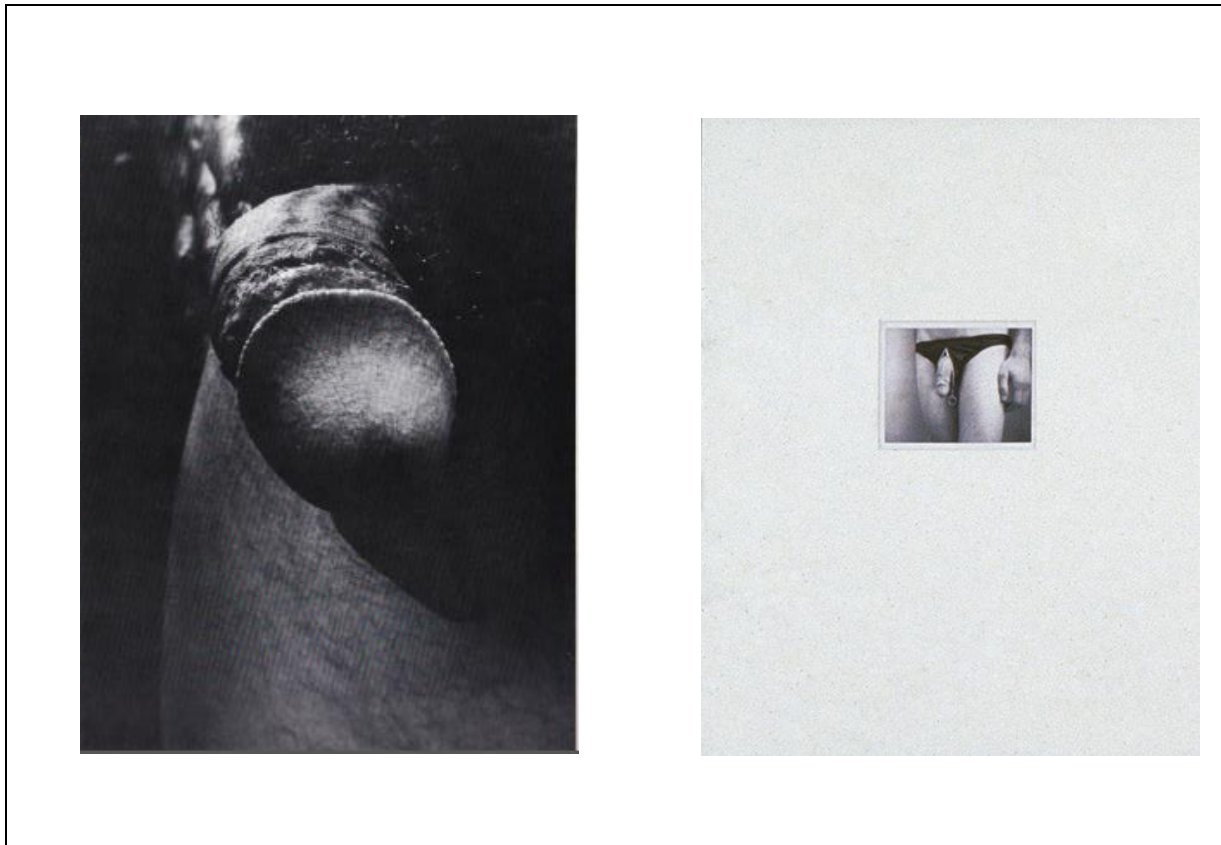


Figure 76 Left: Dianora Niccolini Untitled, 1975, Right: Robert Mapplethorpe, Untitled, 1973, Polaroid 9 x 13 cm, image source Roslyn Oxley Gallery

The key difference between Niccolini and Mapplethorpe here is that Mapplethorpe is absolutely about framing and highlighting sexuality and sex as well as his own obsessions. In contrast, Niccolini is both working to release the Classical body from the paradigm of it being exclusively white and addressing the absence of the full frontal male nude from public exposure. The penis in her image is not sexualized but acts as a semi abstracted pictorial element in the photo.

Women have, according to Berger (1972, pp. 39-40), been socialized by men into seeing only their own female bodies as beautiful and as a consequence have almost denied themselves exposure to the male body. These comments, made a few years before the creation of the penis photos

provides some of the background to Niccolini's images. Such penis focused

works provide an option for dealing with this dilemma and attempts to reveal the natural formal qualities of something that had been problematic, at that time, in our aesthetic canon. Niccolini provides a means to look, by employing artistic license and abstraction. She is actively throwing off accepted norms, owning her own desire to look – to gaze. There is nothing covert about her interest and she further pursues this through a series of nude, well-muscled men from the 1980's through to the late 2000's.

Niccolini is doing a few things here in the two photographs; firstly she is working in a contentious area associated with women looking at the penis; secondly she is working alongside the Classical figure by highlighting bawdier aspects of the male godhead; and finally she is creating new linkages and transforming the idealized penis into an organic format that is neither sterile nor over the top in terms of being a Priapus.

During the early 1980s Niccolini explores the male nude more comprehensively and begins to work with the more traditional form of the Classical figure. In doing so she attempts to both enliven and open it up to new meanings, especially through the use of the Black male model, which does not occur in Classical imagery. She is turning us away from the penis and extending the gaze towards the whole body, so that looking is more generalized and wide ranging.



Figure 77: Dianora Niccolini, *Untitled*, 1980, Weiermair, P. *Male Nudes by Women* (1995), Edition Stemmler, Zurich.

In *Untitled* (1980), (Figure 77) we are encouraged to move outside the borders of the frame. Niccolini sets this up through the use of a cropping strategy which implies that the figure is lifting outside the immediate confines of the picture. One of the model's arms is moving slowly up and through the edges of the pictorial plane and his head, other arm and



shoulder are in the process of opening up the body as he turns in a fluid unhurried arc. The viewer's gaze is not static.

The model is statuesque and sumptuously muscled, yet simultaneously appears quite helpless. His arms are held up in front of him producing a sense of fragile softness. If one tests this position, physically, the sensation is one of gentle looseness if relaxed and feels similar to a blocking action in shadow boxing, if in tension. Consequently, this is an ambivalent image, both soft and hard. This contrasts with the usual image of an athlete full of active kinetic energy<sup>41</sup>. Niccolini is questioning and transforming the nature of masculinity through this softening of the figure. She is also transforming the idea of the sterile closed Classical figure into one that is more active and accessible, opened to new meanings.

Through *Untitled* (1980) Niccolini challenges the traditional, trope of the white, heroic male nude and comments on the absence of the black male figure in Classical imagery. The whole body in this photograph is pumped up which gives it the appearance of a shiny super hero toy or someone who is part of a body building gym culture. As Long describes them "Stiff engorged Schwarzenegger bodies seem to be surrogate penises – with nowhere to go but stand there looking massive (Long, 1997. p. 20-23). However, Niccolini transforms this massiveness by softening the figure and providing a quietly settled atmosphere of calmness and serenity through the movement of the body. The hint of a smile on the model's face also supports the atmosphere of tranquillity.

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<sup>41</sup>It might also reference the statue of *Boxer at Rest* (around 330BC) at the Museo delle Terme, Rome

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In this regard, it is again useful to compare Niccolini's treatment of the black, male nude with that of her colleague Mapplethorpe.

The pair of images *Untitled* (1980) (as discussed above) by Niccolini and *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980-1) (Figure 78) by Mapplethorpe also provides an understanding of the different emphases the artists are concerned with. Niccolini depicts the body as a beautiful, gentle and aestheticized figure. Her treatment of the black male is one that reflects his beauty whilst simultaneously replacing the white male figure as a Classical body. As an unclothed body this figure is quite statuesque in format and that idealization of nudity serves to remove much of the erotic sting that a partially clad body might have. Mapplethorpe, however, deliberately frames the penis through the medium of the suit and a carefully placed fragment of white shirt. The body has been erased and the penis is the focus of his interest. There is no doubt that this is especially about male homosexuality and desire – what he wants to see.

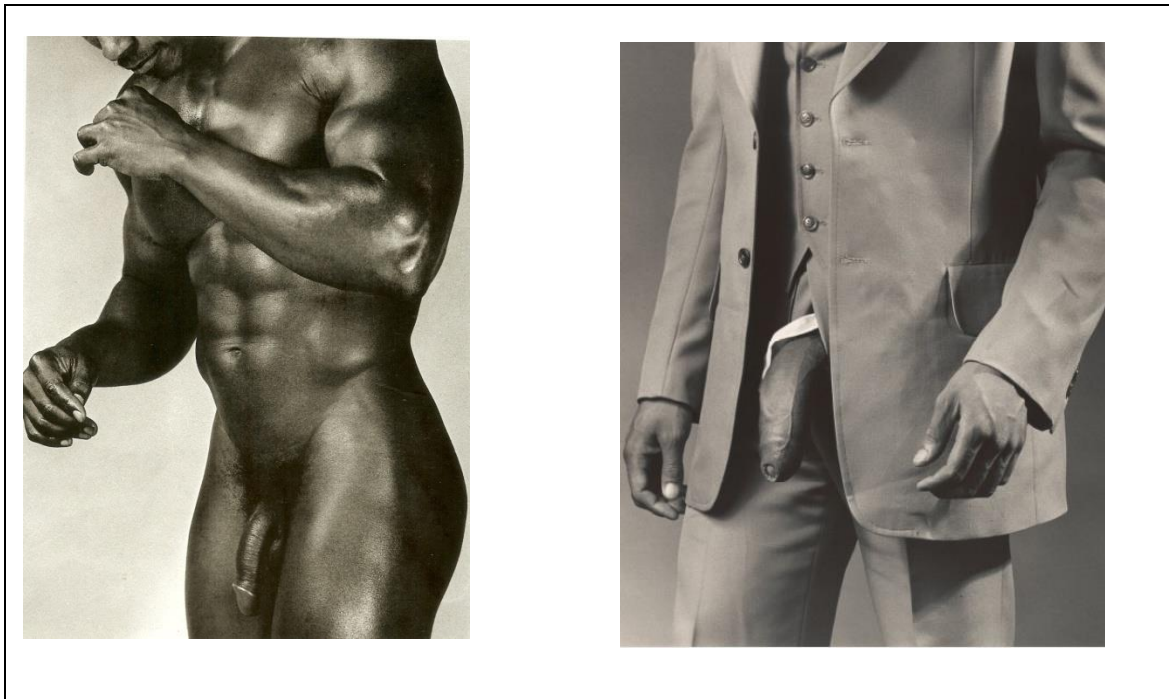


Figure 78: Left: Dianora Niccolini, *Untitled*, 1980: Right: Robert Mapplethorpe *Man in Polyester Suit*, 1980-81

Kobena Mercer, describing Robert Mapplethorpe's image *Man in Polyester Suit* (1981), says that he traps the black male figure:

The glossy, shining, fetishized surface of the black skin thus serves and services a white male desire to look and enjoy the fantasy of mastery precisely through the scopic intensity that the pictures solicit (1994, p. 435).

Mercer says that Robert Mapplethorpe's treatment of Milton Moore, the model in this photo, generally objectifies and fetishizes the black male body. This mastery takes the form of a white male spectatorship that both colonizes the black man and traps him in a sexualized gaze. According to Mercer, Mapplethorpe applies a lens which equates this figure with sexuality "BLACK+MALE = EROTIC/AESTHETIC Object" which fixes and isolates the male figure and allows unfettered pleasure in looking (1994, pp. 435-438). Essentially Mercer is objecting to Mapplethorpe's colonization of the black body and the reinforcement of white masculine privilege. The lack

of a face or head also depersonalizes the figure although according to Stephens Mr. Moore asked Mapplethorpe to omit his face (2017, p. 44-45) to provide anonymity to him.

Glen Ligon also commented on these works through his work *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991-1993) comprising of cut out images of Mapplethorpe nudes from his *Black Book* (1988) underpinned by text from various writers about the place of the Black male in a white cultural and societal context. This focused on his own identity and the relationship the white community had with the Black peoples and added to the “debate that centered on race and power, art and representation” (Stephens, 2017, pp. 44-45).

In these paired images we are given similar photographic strategies, which are used to diverse ends. Niccolini is working within a cultural paradigm and set of pictorial conventions that through necessity sit within a masculine Western cultural set of values. Yet when one looks at *Untitled* (1980) (Figure 78 on the left) the approach is quite different from Mapplethorpe’s *Man in Polyester Suit* (1980-81) (Figure 78 on the right) - the naked body versus the partly covered sexualized body. This is where that search for a visual language is clear and her release of the body outside the frame is in distinct contrast to the faceless, objectified, closely-cropped and framed body entertained by Mapplethorpe.

Where the early works of Niccolini often remove the face and head of the model, and employ particular cropping techniques, more recent imagery includes the face and allows more space for the figure, providing the model with agency and the capacity to return the spectator's look.

This is exemplified in *Male Nude Lying in the Sea* (1997) (Figure 79) and *Edwin Bending Back (Reflection)* (2001) (Figure 80). Milani says that such figures are archetypes which are:

like figures the ancient Greeks placed on their temples to represent the Sun god or the god of the oceans. As such they are mythic embodiments of nature's powers. (Milani in Kirkpatrick, 2015)



Figure 79: Dianora Niccolini, *Male Nude Lying in the Sea*, 1997, silver gelatin print 35.5 x 28 cm, Dianora Niccolini website <http://www.dianoraniccolini.com/>, accessed 08Jan2016

*Male Nude Lying in the Sea* (1997) and *Edwin Bending Back (Reflection)* (2001) immerse the figure in water and also liberates and activates the body in space. The former image places the supine figure in a limpid, sparkling, pool with scribbles of cracked mud or stone supporting it, suggesting sensual bodily pleasure on the part of the model; whereas the latter image energizes the body revealing its strength and power, so that he is indeed an embodiment of a, still Classical, godlike form. Once again there is a strong reference to Classical statuary through the beauty of this body whilst his position in the water and bodily movement is enlivening rather than sterile.



This conjunction of the body with nature and in particular the fluidity of water negates that tendency towards the sterility observed by Nicolson and to an extent makes the figure more accessible. She is seeking to take the Classical canon and transform it through these associations and in that search is working through the creation of metamorphic exchanges. The artist is seeing beauty not in terms of a death or sterility but in terms of regrowth and regeneration.

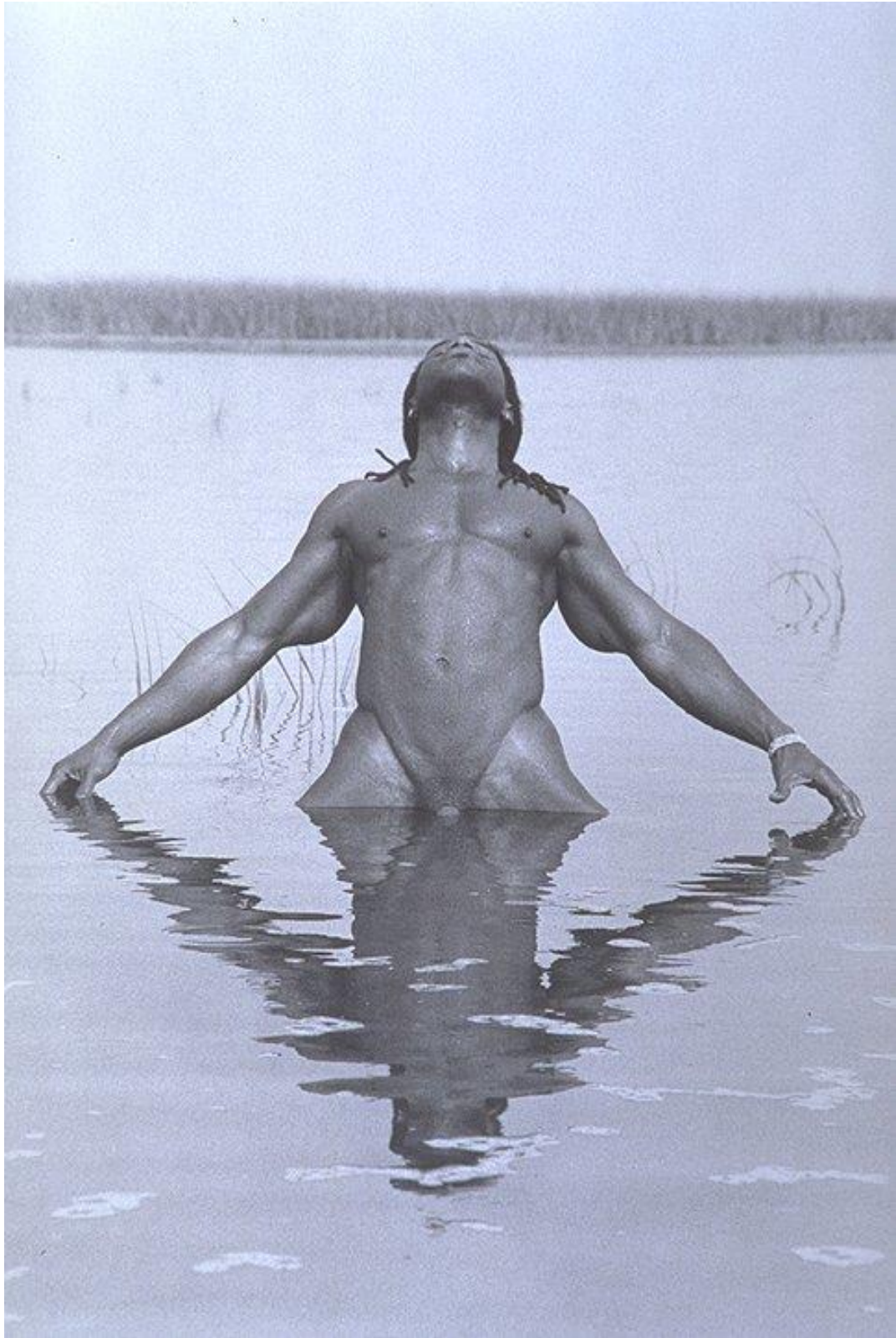


Figure 80: Dianora Niccolini, Edwin Bending Back (Reflection), 2001, silver gelatin print 32 x 22 cm

It is evident that she has continuously developed throughout her practice and has gradually settled on an ongoing analysis of the beautiful male form whilst revealing her pleasure in picturing it.

Similarly, Renee Cox photographs the naked black male to provoke commentary about his absence in the white Western canon whilst offering a viable alternative. Both artists recognize that “the black body often carries negative social and cultural associations in Western art”, where the black female is “equated with illicit sexuality and the enslaved body the black male with sexual animalistic prowess” (Mahon, 2007, pp. 219-220). Both are trying to subvert this paradigm.



Figure 81: Michelangelo Buonarroti, David (1501-04) marble 14', Academia Galleria, Florence, <http://www.accademia.org/explore-museum/artworks/michelangelos-david/>

## RENEE COX

Renee Cox uses metramorphosis as a means to transform prevailing tropes and opens up cultural meanings associated with the Classical male nude. She is using the black male nude to represent an important counter to the usual Classical image epitomised by the beautiful white male body.

At the core of Renee Cox's work is an ongoing exploration of her own persona, her place in the world and, ultimately, her role as a black female artist. However, it does still feed into the broader scope of her long-term interest in the body and is intrinsic to and a natural part of being a fully resolved, female, heterosexual human being. According to Amelia Jones many artists:

look for strategies to counter the objectification of women, people of colour, and queers in the long term history of Euro-American visual culture in order to de-objectify themselves and imagine themselves as potentially having agency to produce art (rather than as Mulvey puts it,) only embodying the fears and desires of the subjects in power (2012, kindle edition, p. 67).

Cox is also criticizing the way in which feminism focused on white female middle class issues. Thus her main focus is the re-establishment of a black feminine position within a white, Western, masculine dominant culture which has traditionally depicted men and women of colour as exotic specimens and signifiers of a particular sexual stereotype. She is countering that cliché, saying that she has always had a keen interest in “blowing black stereotypes out of the water” (2009, [www.reneecox.org/](http://www.reneecox.org/) accessed 30 Oct 2017).

*David* (1994) (Figure 82) transforms Michelangelo’s *David* into a beautiful black man. He steps down from the pedestal in the Academia, in Florence, straight out of Renaissance classicism onto the same level as the viewer. He holds a book, symbolic of his search for knowledge, rather than a war-like slingshot – knowledge versus violence. The book signifies a “decolonization of the mind” and the act of stepping down off his pedestal proposes that the old has been usurped by the new man (Cox, 14<sup>th</sup> April, 2015). Cox has taken a well-known exemplar of Western cultural values off its pedestal and in doing so she replaces the usual stereotypical classical figure with an alternative form of David who emerges as a black body out of a darkened background.

The ground acts as a powerful, mysterious screen pushing the man forward, accentuating the paler body and making him emerge into the light. This is in direct contrast to the earlier sculpture which stands in the marble domed gallery at the Academia, under an oculus that creates natural, creamy light enhanced by the underpinning pale marble floors. He towers above the spectator's head, the focus of the gaze and surrounded by admiring crowds of tourists – a piece of theatre.

According to Richard Leppert (Leppert, 1996, p. 249), Michelangelo's *David* is a spectacle which is "there to be cruised", set on a metaphorical, and literal, pedestal where "viewers must look up to take in the figure" or stand a fair way back from it, in order to accommodate its presence and size. This suggests that the Italian Renaissance reversion to Classical forms reaffirms the idea of a superior cultural exemplar, one that continually reinforces and endorses Greek models through white European ideals (Dutton, 1995; Jones, 2012).





Figure 82: Renee Cox, Flippin' the Script series, David, 1996, 101.6 x 152.4 cm, silver gelatin print., image source Renee Cox website <http://www.reneecox.org/#!flippin-the-script/clgoi>, accessed 08 Jan 2016

Michelangelo's *David* is beautiful and remote, a product of artifice, made for theatre, whereas Cox's *David* is darkly alive, glowing and full of suppressed energy and movement "ready for action" as well as quite accessible to the viewer through his proximity and close framing (Bordo, 1999, p. 171). The bushy Afro hairstyle is suggestive of a political statement of black power, and representative of a totally different set of cultural values from that of Michelangelo. *David* (1996) represents a black idealized figure that rejects

the pervasive and still largely current Florentine Eurocentric paradigm. He appears to hover or levitate in space freeing him up from the grounding confines of the earth and elevating him as a liberated body in space.

Cox (14<sup>th</sup> April, 2015) says that she was seeking to “flip the script” in order to inject black people into the Renaissance form, which largely excludes such figures. Choosing Michelangelo’s *David* is quite audacious as it represents both high Renaissance values and, equally importantly, the autonomy and political strength of Florence and the Medici family - essentially an idealized figure which reflects the power of the state. Cox is returning agency and power to the black male body and inserting it into the canon as an alternative as well as making a political statement about the nature of her times. She also says that the nude is powerful and pure and it is through this that she delivers the body’s strength. Usually this occurs through her own body which is also strong and powerful, but in this series it is the male that she sees as beautiful.

The traditional association of the black man with “attractive but dangerous sexuality, an apparently abundantly, limitless but threatening fertility” is also brought into focus with this figure (Young, 1995, p. 97; Mahon, 2007, pp. 250-253). Cox is commenting on this misapprehension by deliberately placing a book in the hand of David, and undercutting this racist paradigm. Thus, not only is he the antithesis of the deliberately malformed images of black men used in ethnographic literature. He challenges the fears of white men that their women might be “thrilled with a strange delight by daily contact with their dusky servitors” (Young, 1995, p. 145).

Young suggests that the usual image of Afro-American men plays on physiological disparity from a white dominant culture and highlights “physical differences in which African faces, contrived to resemble apes as much as possible, are contrasted to European faces (or types) that are illustrated by Greek sculpture” (1995, p. 96) Cox, through the use of ethnographical tropes “parodies the sexist [and racist] philosophy of ethnography” (Noel, 2014, p. 163) and is metamorphosing the meanings of such a figure.

This theme continues in *Atlas* (Figure 83) where Cox, as an act of playful defiance, places Africa as central to the map of the world, turning the Americas and Europe away from the viewer. In contrast to the statue of Atlas, who usually literally strains and contorts under the weight of the world <sup>42</sup>, this man is strong, finely built and lifts the inflatable beach ball world up above his head without much effort. The stable positioning of the figure creates a statuesque monumentality yet his lithe body and open Maltese cross stance – arms up and legs extended – creates energies within the image. Additionally, he moves outside the frame, through the placement of the orb, the lengthened left leg and the strong vertical line of the dominant limb, all of which extend the line of sight to the borders of the picture. His arms also activate the space suggesting vitality and kinetic energy which could be released at any moment.

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<sup>42</sup> Although the mythological god actually held up the sky, so the later version is an interesting anomaly.



Figure 83: Renee Cox, *Flippin' the Script* series, *Atlas*, 1996, 101.6 x 152.4 cm, silver gelatin print., image source Renee Cox website <http://www.reneecox.org/#flippin-the-script/clgoi>, accessed 08 Jan 2016

Once again the black background both highlights the body and enhances its line so that the energetic movement is accentuated. This blackness alludes to the power of the black figure whilst commenting on the pervasiveness of white cultural values which use “white as the standard

against which all other colours of the human are measured” (Leppert, 1996, p. 199).

Anderson says:

The Western world embraced the nude, especially when its credentials had been established by reference to a mythological, biblical past which conferred an unchallengeable respectability (2008, p. 97).

However, the nude this describes is usually a white one rather than black, which is often used to denote malfeasance. In images referencing biblical narratives, Adam is effectively the first man, the progenitor of all human kind yet he is most usually depicted as Caucasian. This is at odds with all manner of historical biological evidence that all humans are effectively the result of a small number of genetic variations and all originally from proto-African mitochondrial Adams and Eves. Cox reimagines Adam as a black man, free of shame or weakness and quite different from the usual craven figure used in biblical imagery.



Figure 84: Renee Cox, Flippin' the Script series, Adam, 1995, 101.6 x 152.4 cm, silver gelatin print, image source Renee Cox website <http://www.reneecox.org/#!flippin-the-script/clgoi>, accessed 08Jan2016

*Adam* (1995) (Figure 84) proposes that the first human, in biological and genealogical terms, was not the Caucasian, pale, brown-haired and blue eyed being that has been used to construct traditional Western Christian iconography of Adam. He is shown as tall, proud, well proportioned,



dreadlocked and beautiful, easy in his skin and moving forward out of the frame. The strategy of floating the body in formless space sets up a situation where we are given only the body without any particular external context or markers other than the simple prop of the apple. The scale of these photos also provides a strong presence, as they are approximately life size, and this also allows the body to move through the frame and potentially out of it. Thoughtful, dreadlocked Adam is caught in the moment just before accepting self-knowledge and autonomy. His partner Eve shares this experience, as Cox has depicted them as a pair. So rather than Adam being the solitary vulnerable and hapless dupe brought down by Eve, he is depicted as full of strength and ease – an Afro Jamaican man full of his own autonomy and power.

One of the interesting aspects of both Niccolini and Cox's work is that they both work with gender and racial stereotypes and comment almost simultaneously about them. This is strongly sustained in *Pieta* (Cox, 1996) (Figure 85) where the vulnerability and seeming passivity of the male figure is contrasted to the strong female presence.



Figure 85: Renee Cox, *Pieta*, 1995, silver gelatin print, dimensions not stated but likely to be 101.6 x 152.4 cm, image sourced from Renee Cox website, <http://www.reneecox.org/#!flippin-the-script/clgoi>, accessed 08Jan2016



Figure 86: Michelangelo, *Pieta*, 1498-99, marble, 174 x 195 cm, St Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, image sourced from <http://www.italianrenaissance.org/michelangelos-pieta/>

Once again Cox responds to a well-known, image of wounded motherhood, loss and grief through reimagining Michelangelo's *Pieta* (1498-99) (Figure 86). She replaces the white Caucasian figures with Afro-Jamaican bodies and underpins this by changing all of the usual markers of Western white cultural values; effectively "exposing the interrelation of sexual and racial fetishism" (Jones, 2012, p. 98). The male figure is a beautiful, strong black

man and the female figure is strong, dignified and bare breasted, clothed in patterned materials suggestive of African motifs.

Formally the tight cropping of the image suggests a closed-in intimacy where the bodies fill the space in a steady triangular format effectively keeping the pair stable. This Madonna is focused inwards, her gaze lifted up off the body, seemingly into a contemplative void. This contrasts with Michelangelo's treatment of her gaze, where the Madonna looks to the groin of the man on her thighs. Cox's woman is grieving, monolithic and strong, whereas Michelangelo's is beautiful and almost absent as she looks at the vulnerable figure she tenuously holds.

The body of Christ is subtly different as well. Where Michelangelo creates an emaciated heavily slumped body Cox uses a strong, open, yet alert one. Through this configuration the black male is used to question religious iconography that rarely uses non-white bodies to represent Christian visual tropes. Cox is also playing with closely aligned themes aggregating race, gender and religion. As Jones (2012) notes, this reveals the persistent binaries and oppositions generated in Western European culture which would never consider a black man and woman as exemplars of a Madonna and child.

Where both Niccolini and Cox appropriate and replace the white classical body with the black male figure as a means of commenting on and transforming this canon, Harriet Leibowitz employs the classical form as a

basic framework which is then populated with an emotional internal life, in contrast to the usually quite sterile classical figure.

HARRIET LEIBOWITZ

David McCarthy says that the nude is “our constant guide”;

Our mirror and our lamp, telling us who we are in all of our variety, while also holding forth the possibility of communing with the eternal (1998, p. 97).

Essentially the nude is a reflection of our times, constantly keeping pace with the moment. In this there is a stress on moral, human exemplary qualities through the beauty of the figure. Ettinger identifies that in a masculine, phallic paradigm, beauty as an ideal has been developed in relation to death, in terms of the artist seeking immortality, and that beauty is associated with “the soul, psyche or spirit” (2006, pp. 197-8). Whereas the matrixial, she postulates, shifts this conceptually into a transformational process. She says:

The artist desires to transform death, nonlife, not-yet-life, and no-more-life into art, in co-emergence and in co-fading –into a theatre of the soul with its jouissance and trauma (2006, p. 197).

Ettinger is transforming the potentially sterile aim of capturing immortality through an idealized vision of the soul or psyche into something that promises to encapsulate a generative aspect. This occurs through metramorphosis which introduces new associations and transgressions, passageways. Harriet Leibowitz exemplifies this approach by developing images of the nude incorporating colour and texture as well as referencing



Greek and Renaissance ideals and through this extension of the male nude she changes the quite cold trope into one that enlivens the figure.



Figure 87: Harriet Leibowitz, *Shooting*, 2001, Lambda C print on black plexiglass, 182.8 x 101.6 cm

Several works in the *Soul* (2001) series bring in elements of the well-proportioned classical body and extend, and abstract it, by using colour, photographic effects and a reduced palette for the background. *Shooting* (2001) (Figure 87) plays on classical statuary, such as *Zeus/ Poseidon Throwing a Spear/ Thunderbolt*, to create a modern equivalent. The modern man uses a gun rather than a thunderbolt but the theme is contiguous and



the stance reflects the original works. In much the same way that Joan Semmel uses colour to render the body abstract and highlight the emotional qualities and energies of the figure, Leibowitz employs a hot yellow tincture and blurred glowing margins to activate the body. This image takes the classical form, possibly referencing the original highly coloured qualities of such statuary (Dunstan, 2000, p. 31, p. 171; Siebler, 2007, p. 10) whilst providing it with contemporary terminology; suggesting modern heat sensitive materials that glow when the heat of the body warms it, as well as medical imaging.

The intense heightened key of the colours, contrasting with the smoky blackened background, energize the figure, so that it seems to vacillate and burn in the eye. There is an otherworldly quality to this figure which suggests a body through night vision goggles and the warm target for a heat seeking-missile. This reveals simultaneously the eternal classical form married to highly advanced technology.

This eerie modern take on the body is extended in other images in the series. *Ego* (2001) (Figure 88), similarly, places the figure in a nowhere field of black smoky plexiglass, moving it out and through the frame, so that the puppet-like man dances and capers through space. Again the image references medical imaging technology, perhaps even Theosophist photographs of subjects flowing with numinous, and dubious, ectoplasm.

These images use the classical form as a starting point and augment it with additional, lively, characteristics. One of the things we tend to forget about

Greek antique statuary is that originally it was highly coloured and, probably to our eyes, quite lurid (Dunstan, 2000, p. 31, p. 171; Siebler, 2007, p. 10). Hence these works revisit and abstract this theme by reimagining those bright schemas. In this case it works to refill the empty and potentially sterile body with heat and if the title is anything to go by an essence of human “soul” or “chi”; the figure becomes a translucent container revealing the inner man, full of light and perfume something like an ancient alabastron.

What this strategy does is continue the idealized form and extend it to reflect on the inner life of the man; so rather than the shell of the body being the focus, the coloured essences within that shell, suggest the beauty of the soul, which was one of the original classical concepts behind the ideal body. *Whisp* (2001) (Figure 89) takes this even further by abstracting the figure to its essentials.



Figure 88: Harriet Leibowitz, *Ego*, 2001, Lambda C print on black plexiglass , 182.8 x 101.6 cm, image source Harriet Leibowitz website, <http://www.harriettleibowitz.com/soul-2/>, accessed 08Jan2016



Figure 89: Harriet Leibowitz , *Whisp*, 2001, Lamda C print on black plexiglass , 182.8 x 101.6 cm, image source Harriet Leibowitz website, <http://www.harrielleibowitz.com/soul-2/>, accessed 08Jan2016

*Essence* (2001) (Figure 89) and *Being* (2001)<sup>43</sup> (Figure 90) create the illusion of a vase or container as well, where the figure is filled with light and vaporous smokiness, shadowy forms and the suggestion of both black and white skins. Thus the figure is universal in the sense of its racial composition. In their full scale they would have another level of intensity

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<sup>43</sup> Also known as *Emerging #1* and *Emerging #2* (2001)

and power. Something about the fluidity of the figure, encased in the traditionally slim, crisp form, vibrates with movement, in contrast to the stiffness and hyper-masculinity of Niccolini's figures, for example, which convey an obviously phallic aspect of manhood and speak of display, whereas these figures avoid that trope. The combination of dark and light bodies within the single figure also causes a form of visual alternation constantly switching between the pair. This effect is optically lively causing a great deal of movement up and down the length of the body. There are no clearly recognizable genital markers involved here. We are only given basic signifiers of the body; enhanced muscularity, the suggestion of the armour-like cuirasse form of the male torso, scale; the suggestion of a mild handsome face, yet it is still clearly a masculine body.

This series produces a sense of flowing energy and movement as well as potentially, inviting encounters. The figures are in transit and move within themselves through their internal energies and fire and this appears to create an interaction between the viewer and the image. Through the negation of a stereotypical hard man and the sterility of the classical ideal these images provide a lyrical and emotional alternative to them. The surface of the body has been dissolved and borders shifted to create a new form of the classical figure that is both elegant and alive.



Figure 90: Harriet Leibowitz, *Essence*, 2001, or alternatively *Emerging # 1*, 2001, Lambda C Print on plexiglass, 182.8 x 101.6 cm, image source Harriet Leibowitz website <http://www.harriettleibowitz.com/soul-2/>, accessed 08Jan2016





Figure 91: Harriet Leibowitz, *Being*, 2001, alternatively *Emerging #2*, 2001, Lambda C Print on plexiglass, 182.8 x 101.6 cm, image source Harriet Leibowitz website <http://www.harriettleibowitz.com/soul-2/>, accessed 08Jan2016

The three artists in this chapter are all working to transform the stereotypical classical figure from the one seen in a Western canon, namely white, inward looking and a sterile, closed vessel to a revised iteration of the figure.

Women have often used appropriation and positional reversal in this genre as there has not really been an obvious alternative to this trope and they

have chosen to work within the dominant culture in order to subvert it. Leibowitz, however, has created a new way of looking at the body which references the Classical ideal yet strives to populate it with a richer emotional tenor. Nicolson describes the classical paragon as sterile and Leibowitz turns this around by developing the inner aspect of the male figure. Leibowitz's works in this suite provide exemplars of Ettinger's proposal that the matrixial can set up new strings and threads outside the rather sterile trope of the Classical figure. She is making new connections and filling that body with something more able to reflect the idea of a soul. This development reflects more closely elements of our particular era which may drive different approaches to image making. Bourriaud (2002, p. 28) identifies modern emergent new forms of electronic media as some of the new methods of developing connectivity, networks and encounters and Leibowitz appears to be bringing aspects of this into her work. All of these images use a visual terminology that directly cites current technology and practice. The pictures in the *Soul* series carry high-tech visual cues which bring this sense of infra-dig information communications technology and imaging to the fore. The use of plexiglass also lends itself to this sense of high-tech materiality, so that the object has a more tangible yet liminal presence through the translucent nature of the surface. This also suits the numinous nature of the subject.

Initially, in this research, there seemed to be problems with women working with the classical ideal as it is still heavily involved with a masculine viewpoint. However, Leibowitz, in particular, has managed to create a new

vision which does not produce a barrier to looking. Metamorphosis and flow occurs in these pictures, where there are inner connections being identified within the body and thus an opening to the spectator allowing for “encounters and connections” (Ettinger, 2007, forum). This contrasts with the traditional Classical form that has a slick barrier of nudity often deflecting the gaze and militating against building connections. Leibowitz is stripping away the associations the classical nude has with authority and masculine cultural power and transforming the body into an accessible medium for creating new threads and encounters.

Bracha Ettinger proposes that the matrixial borderspace is always about connections, resonances and exchanges of energy between us. The artists here reflect the gradual development of women’s practice to form such networks as well as developing strategies for working effectively with the nude. Each one evidences the gradual and sometimes fraught process of finding an appropriate and relevant visual language for themselves as well as genuinely reflecting women’s values and artistic growth.

## CONCLUSION

### OUTCOMES

This thesis has explored a previously neglected aspect of female artistic practice, the male nude, through the lens of a matrixial gaze. The concept of the matrixial gaze has previously primarily<sup>44</sup> been associated with, and applied to, the work of its creator, psychoanalyst and artist, Bracha Ettinger, and not in the context of the male nude. In my research I have extended and applied this framework by seeking aspects of the matrixial gaze and metramorphosis in the practices of a small selection of female artists working in that genre.

The matrixial paradigm supports partial and shared subjectivity within artistic encounters as opposed to the usual binary of subject/object relating which has been the topic of extensive art historical research over the last fifty years. Such research has identified and discussed the need for a means to transcend polarizing forms of the gaze and this can be addressed through the theory of a matrixial gaze and metramorphic borderlinking.

Ettinger provides a means of being involved in the artistic encounter as a participant rather than gazer or gazed at. This incorporates not only the artist and their model/s but includes the audience or viewers. Each of the partial subjects within the meeting brings with them traces of previous encounters and through those germs and grains is able to create more aspects or new links and associations which pass on outside that meeting.

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<sup>44</sup> Tina Kinsella (2013) has used the matrixial gaze to analyse works by Frida Kahlo

There is emergence and fading, co-emergence and co-fading, co-poïesis and fascinace, duration and time, wit(h)nessing and sharing.

This form of gaze is not exclusively about visual pleasure. The matrixial gaze allows for an extension of the idea of a gaze into a more indirect mode of relating with one another. This is not so much a gaze as we have been used to describing or imagining it, but perhaps a regard, an attention to others that extends to the imaginary, the psychic and the physical. In this form of a gaze or regard we may experience erotic pleasure and sensual linking but we may also be exposed to trauma and sorrow. A range of erotic, humorous, playful and painful moments and encounters can take place in this matrixial space. This range of pleasures and displeasures can be seen in the work of the women analysed throughout this thesis.

The impetus for this research was the personal observation that there seems to be a lack of female artists working with the male nude. This was underpinned by the need to understand how women might work in that genre; especially as male artists have frequently been accused of sexualizing and objectifying the female body. As a result the female artist has been challenged to work with the body in ways that did not continue to perpetuate the same binary in subject/object relations that had been previously observed in the work of male artists. I have found that the artists under scrutiny here demonstrate that there does not necessarily need to be an oppositional paradigm to making or looking but there can be various co-valent positions within the axes of the matrix. Effectively, different roles or entry points are used to move within the aesthetic creative process. This

allows for individual responses and approaches, media and material yet still produces brief encounters, intersections and connection points, releases and re-buildings between actors. The female artists surveyed have demonstrated various aspects of the matrixial gaze and metramorphic borderlinking. In the process they have also revealed compassionate hospitality, empathy and sympatico with their subjects, whilst seeking to create a non-objectifying means of depicting the male body. They also exemplify a means to work with the other rather than in opposition.

This has been identified in the way that Sylvia Sleigh exemplifies matrixial attributes associated with fascinane and duration through her sustained interest and involvement with the male body as well as her especially close involvement with a few particular favourite models who take on the role of muse. Her generous practice brings together the long-lived trope of the muse, referencing well-known historical paintings which she transforms by bringing new meanings to them as well as the durational aspect of working with the figure during her painterly practice. Fascinane occurs through her delight in the material, intimate involvement with her sitters and the way in which she uses her gaze to transform and free the person she is working with rather than transfixing them.

The co-poietic framework, where individuals work together to share partial subjectivity, is clearly in evidence through the erotic pairings depicted in Chapter 3. The images of couples sharing subjectivity and creating new beings exemplify the way in which the subject/object paradigm can be subverted by exchanges between co-makers as co-poiesis brings on and sets



up the conditions for metramorphosis. Each of the models or persons depicted is a partial subject who creates the work in conjunction with the artist and, quite often, the audience. This can be seen in Joan Semmel's paintings where the scale of the paintings and use of abstraction destabilizes the viewer whilst drawing them into the matrixial encounter. Wendy Sharpe also works in tandem with her partners to create and erotic encounter. These encounters are even more immersive in Cecily Brown's works. Her extensive use of abstraction and obscuration of forms creates a situation where the models, the artist, the material and the audience are working together to create new linkages, working outside the frame to continue the transformative creative process.

Polly Borland and Barbara De Genevieve use both co-poïesis and wit(h)nessing in different series of work that have diverse intentions and objectives. Wit(h)nessing is the dominant theme in Borland's *Babies* series where she works to transform the trauma and pain of the marginalised subculture of men who dress as babies. She also reveals evidence of trans-subjective co-operative making - co-poïesis – by dressing up as a baby and slipping between the roles of photographic operator and being part of the spectacle. Conversely, in the *Smudge* series she uses humour as a means to establish a co-poietic relationship with her subjects. She cheekily dresses and undresses the men who are depicted in that set of work, crossing personal and artistic boundaries through the intimate nature of the interaction and by being intrinsic to the action. Borland's subjects in both

series are projecting something of themselves back to her and are willing partners to the act of creative making.

Similarly Barbara De Genevieve does much the same thing in the *True Life Novelette* series setting up humorous encounters with her models and playing on well-known cultural tropes to playfully subvert them. She also acts as a wit(h)ness when she works alongside the dispossessed, impoverished Afro-American men in the *Panhandler Project*, and in so doing crosses racial and class barriers to heal their wounds and vulnerabilities.

Berlinde De Bruyckere is wit(h)nessing trauma and attempting to help carry it away, as does the audience who in turn brings compassion and understanding into the encounter. The works discussed in this thesis set up various entry points through which we can fill the sculptural form with our own interpretations, repopulations and re-buildings. She invites us in, allows us in to the body, establishing both spatial and conceptual networks. Her collaboration with J.M. Coetzee exemplifies her capacity to encourage slippages and co-making whilst acknowledging the contribution of the audience as an element of this process. We all carry that pain and disperse it in some way and this exemplifies the transformative capacity of wit(h)nessing that Ettinger has identified.

In contrast to the penetrated and wounded body of the vulnerable male figure, the sealed and impervious body of Classicism seems to be an unlikely candidate to reveal the matrixial gaze. The women working with the Classical body have used metramorphosis and borderlinking to transform the sterility

of this trope by creating new meanings and associations. In so doing they bring the male nude full circle. This opens up the usually contained form of the Classical body and regenerates it so that it becomes accessible to the audience whilst still referencing the original concept. Harriet Leibowitz, in particular, pushes the male nude into an emotionally rich figuration which transcends the usually sterile format of the Classical nude. Renee Cox and Dianora Niccolini revisit the form and question the racist underpinnings of the male nude by bringing the Black male body into focus and in doing so provide us with the understanding that all peoples are part of the matrixial gaze.

Usually in theoretical frameworks the gaze is linked to the pleasure of looking and has been associated with a particular schema of attainment of masculine pleasure at the expense of another's agency and power. In contrast the matrixial encourages an imaginary environment that focuses on sharing, interconnectivity and partial subjectivity. The artists in this research exemplify these notions through their compassionate interaction and involvement with their co-makers.

## FUTURE

While this thesis focuses on a small subset of female artists working in painting, sculpture and photography there is fruitful research to be done on the work of female, and male, artists engaging with the male nude through media such as performance, video and film. As Nicolas Bourriard (2002, p.28) notes, this form of practice marks our particular time and generational interests. This is exemplified through the recent work of Emma Thomson who uses dating sites and applications such as “happn” and “Tinder”<sup>45</sup> to select young men as models or sitters for the series *you know we were matched on a very special day* (2015). This form of speculative selection reflects and comments on networking and dating practices within new multimedia forms where the sitter constructs their own persona and interacts and collaborates with the artist –selecting the artist as much as she selects him.

As a natural offshoot of this research, popular culture, film in particular, would also benefit from analysis about the absence of full frontal male nudity within its confines<sup>46</sup>. It might be argued that it is still unusual within popular culture to see a full frontal male nude on screen and certainly not with an erection<sup>47</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> Tinder, happn, Grindr are internet sites used by people to arrange potential sexual encounters, each person selects someone they are interested in by swiping their image one way or the other on their phone screen. If they both show interest they meet and see how events transpire.

<sup>46</sup> Pipilotti Rist's *Pickelporno* (1992) and Carolee Schneeman's *Fuses* (1964-67) would both suit analysis using a matrixial approach

<sup>47</sup> Although in the film *The Danish Girl*, the male body was revealed fully nude on several occasions, in this case it reflected the dysmorphia experienced by a transgender person.

Outside of this relatively new field there are also non-Western cultural tropes that have not traditionally used the nude. Even erotic Japanese Shunga prints cover the body and reveal only the sex, and as a consequence there appear to be very few or potentially no women working in this field at all. Animated cartoons and comic books sometimes use images of the human form in dynamic ways and also reveal often sexualized treatments of men and women protagonists. This research opens up the field of investigation into female responses to the male body in the realm of visual arts practice but also has potential to extend more broadly into popular culture and performance without specifically limiting it.

Although this research has been quite specific and focused on women artists, as it was more likely they would reveal aspects of the matrixial gaze, this concept could be brought to bear on any subject regardless of race, gender, identity or bodily conformation and opens up the possibility for a means to encounter, look at and work with the artistic subject without objectification or polarity.



Figure 92: Annie Geard, *Lustration*, 2014 digital photograph, dimensions variable



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